都市シリーズ

風水街都 香港〈下〉

著●川上 稔

TUNE BUST CITY HONG KONG

電撃文庫

H.K. at 1997

都市シリーズ

風水街都香港〈下〉

著●川上稔

電撃文庫

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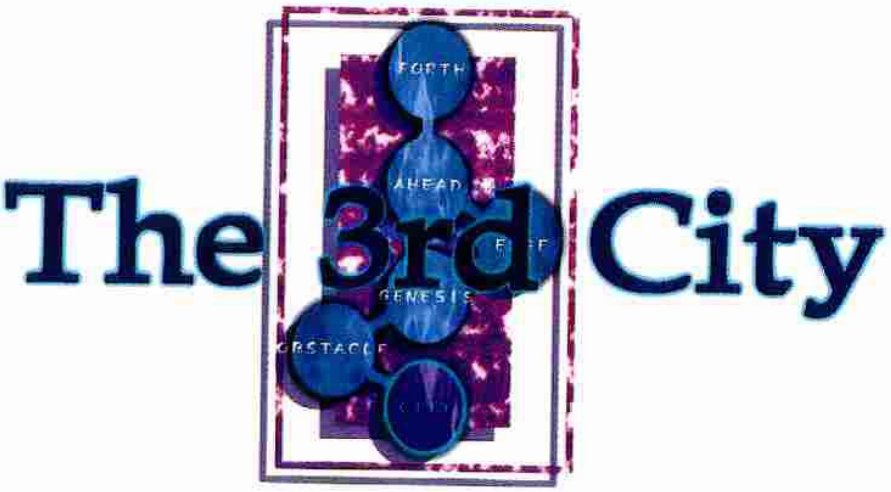


川上　稔（かわかみ　みのる）

1975年1月3日生まれの東京出身。都市シリーズの次作『蠱楽都市 OSAKA』はゲーム化が決定し、企画、シナリオ、総監督を務める。それに合わせ情報満載のホームページも制作中。小説も上下巻の大作を執筆中だが、書いてる時間はあるのか!?

【電撃文庫】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935

エアリアルシティ

風水街都 香港〈上〉〈下〉

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形県生まれの栃木県育ち。テンキー所属。『蠱楽都市 OSAKA』ではキャラクターデザイン担当。趣味は散歩で深夜徘徊。今回、『風水街都 香港〈下〉』ではOSAKAの作業中だというのに会社に独り徹夜で泊まり込んでアキラの尻を描くハメになり、人生に深く苦悩している。

カバー／旭印刷

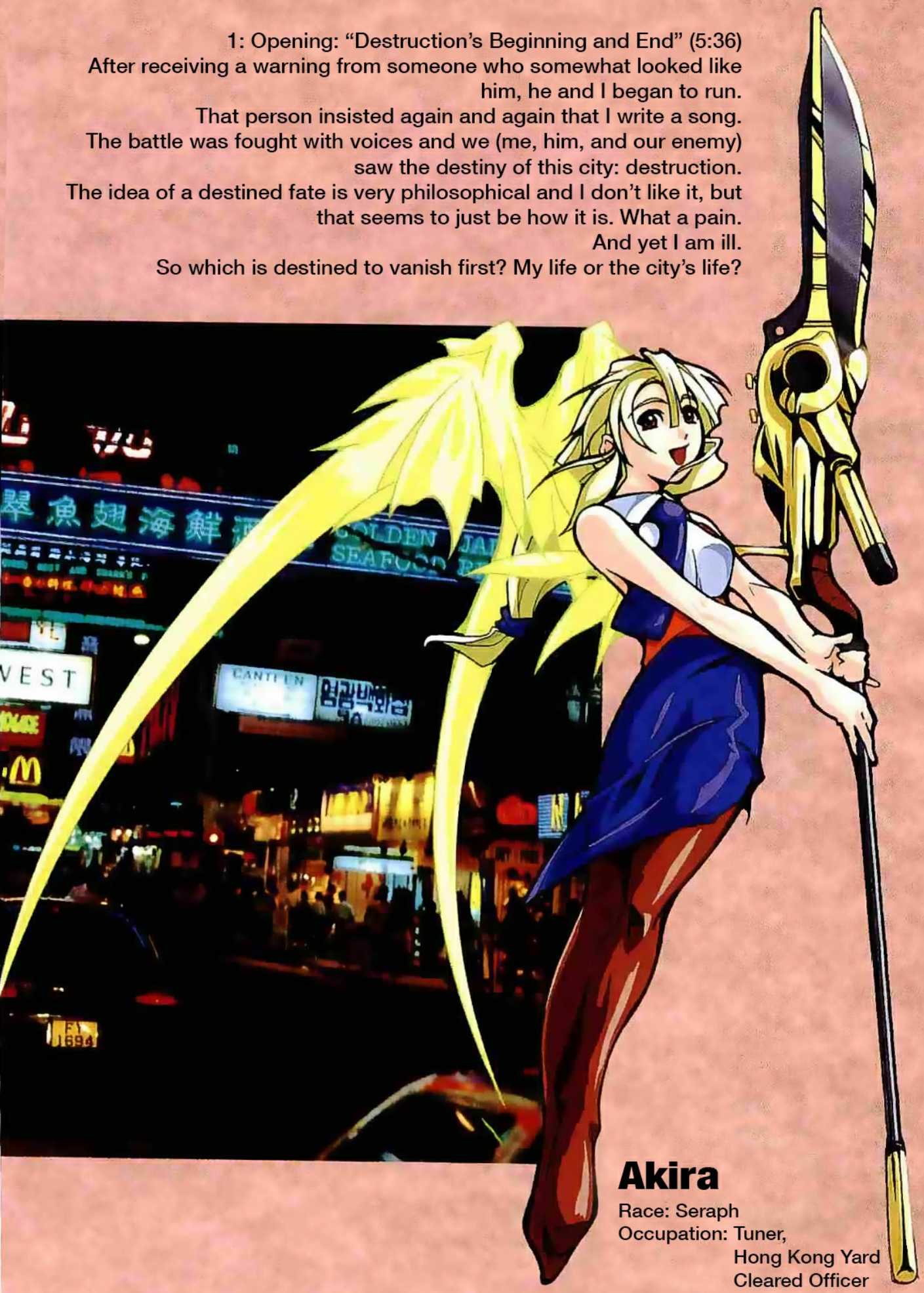
都市シリーズ

風水街都 香港

〈下〉

著●川上 稔

1: Opening: “Destruction’s Beginning and End” (5:36)
After receiving a warning from someone who somewhat looked like him, he and I began to run.
That person insisted again and again that I write a song.
The battle was fought with voices and we (me, him, and our enemy) saw the destiny of this city: destruction.
The idea of a destined fate is very philosophical and I don’t like it, but that seems to just be how it is. What a pain.
And yet I am ill.
So which is destined to vanish first? My life or the city’s life?



Akira

Race: Seraph
Occupation: Tuner,
Hong Kong Yard
Cleared Officer

[1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Characters 1

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[[New – 1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Gunmal

Race: Human
Occupation: Buster
(Second son of the Maldrick family, a European Buster family)

2: “Progress of the Seven Word Song” (7:18)
3: “Bracket-Shaped Twin Vertical Lines” (5:44)
Next thing I knew, he and I were collapsed at the bottom of that hole.
We were surrounded by people and they all kneeled when I stood up.
However, I have lost all confidence in myself.
Maybe it’s my illness or maybe I’m just tired.
My strength keeps dropping and now I can’t even see the moon.
What should I do? Nothing will change if I don’t do anything, but I feel like nothing will change even if I do. This is quite a problem.
I watch the children playing out of the corner of my eye while listening to the adults arguing.
My five senses are exhausted.

Image Story

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Double Lee

Race: Seraph
Occupation: Tuner, Formerly of Archs RDC Special Duty Division

4: “Everyone’s Beginning Occurs in the Five Elements” (4:21)
After trying a great variety of things, I realized that I’m awfully afraid of myself.
Earlier, I felt like I understood why the people had kneeled before me.
I have to think about what to do.
How did I manage to be myself for so long?
It wasn’t like I had gathered others around me to create myself.
But time is terribly complex, so my life is shortening at this very moment and he has begun fighting.
And before I could say a thing, he was injured.

[New – 1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

Characters 2

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[New – 1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

5: “Three Secrets of the Fifth Row” (5:55)
Now, what was it the person who looked like him told me?
To write a song. So what kind of songs do I like?
I can’t think of anything. Oh, dear.
I had always thought I only tilted from the norm as much as the earth’s axis, but it looks like my tilt is far more extreme.
The next thing I knew, I was alone. This is a problem.
All alone, I tell myself I can be too timid and I realize that you can only be timid or forceful once there’s someone else with you.
I immediately think of him.

6: “Consciousness on June 30” (3:01)
7: “Gunmal” (1:23)
Something fun arrived without warning.
I can’t see his hands as they stroke my wings, but I can definitely feel them.
And I begin thinking that it doesn’t matter if I can’t see his Live.
I belatedly decide I want to live and realize just how great the resonance between us is, but that wish most likely won’t be granted.
After all, I have to write a song.
Just like you must know the past to see the future, you have to choose the right people if you want to gain hope.
And the final battle begins.

Fei

Race: Galgallin
Occupation: Formerly of Archs RDC Security Division

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Occupation: Formerly of Archs RDC Security Division

8: “Double Lee” (9:13)
We have to end our fight here.
After getting involved in this old thing, how many of him and me have swung back and forth like a pendulum, unable to move on?
I want to believe it is all reliant on us now and the one who will continue on after us.
The moon has come out.
I want to sing below the moon. I want to sing a song to guide the people.
Yes, more than a map, we need a single song with the great power to see what is coming.
I run in search of that. I move forward and upward.

J-Gun

Race: Human
Occupation: Buster (First son of the Maldrick family, a European Buster family)

Characters 3

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[New – 1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner]

9: “Akira” (4:57)
When I thought about us
(me, him, and our enemy),
I found a certain answer.
After saving this city,
we must correct everything. In other words,
we must return.
All three of us must return together.
Now, what to do?
I am destined to disappear before long,
but when I asked them what they would do,
they simply smiled and nodded.
I didn’t understand.
But fine. If history is viewed as a map,
then I will draw an X at this time.
And that X will take the form of a song.

10: “The Flight Song” (2:17)
Can Destiny be described logically?
The song spreads, he and I raise our children,
and our enemy prepares for a new fight.
We have put all the problems off to the future.
We cannot tell our children that or have them believe
it, but they will surely find their own answers.
So perhaps we should take a picture when they are
too young to be told apart by their wings.
And one day, I will have him pass these notes onto
the person who looks like him.
I need to do that before I disappear.

Genius
Race: Cherub
Occupation: Formerly
of Archs
RDC General
Affairs Division

Image Story

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Occupation: Formerly of Archs RDC General Affairs Division

Summary of Hong Kong History

1840: Opium War begins. England wins and Hong Kong Island is ceded to them. Their rule begins under a policy of laissez-faire.
1842: The First Divine Punishment War begins. The Flight Song is born at the bottom of Hong Kong Cave.
1843: History's first Nein Engel, Huang Daquan, is born.
1863: Archs Trade Organization, the foundation of Archs RDC, is established.
1895: A terrorist attack by radicals from the Revive China Society begins the Second Divine Punishment War.
1898: England demands the Qing dynasty take responsibility for the Second Divine Punishment War, so the Kowloon Peninsula and 235 islands are conceded to England until 1997.
1912: The Republic of China is established.
1913: World War One begins.
1918: World War One ends.
1912: The Communist Party rises in China.
1925: Under the anti-British guidance of Liu Shaoqi of the Chinese Communist Party, Hong Kong begins a 17 month strike. The strike leads into the Third Divine Punishment War.
1939: World War Two begins.
1941: Hong Kong falls under Japanese rule until 1945.
1945: World War Two ends.
1949: The People's Republic of China is established.
1950: The Korean War begins. A flood of war refugees enters Hong Kong.
1956: The massively inflated working class riots, causing the Kowloon Riots.
1958: The Fourth Divine Punishment War begins. The General appears and saves Hong Kong.
1967: The Cultural Revolution begins in China and anti-British riots occur in Hong Kong a well.
1973: The Fifth Divine Punishment War begins. Hong Kong Yard is established.
1984: Discussion between England and China reconfirm Hong Kong's return.
1989: China begins economic reform.
1994: Lee Hu and Luna Azuel die.
1997: Huang Daquan dies. The Sixth Divine Punishment War begins.

TSING YI

MONG KOK

KOW-LOON

HUNG HOM

HONG KONG ISLAND

LAMMA ISLAND

BEAU-FORT ISLAND

"Flight Song"

彼街通天地
墜朝地仰雲

昇夜空謳月
惟望再笑君

That city connects heaven and earth
I fall in the morning and look up to the clouds from the earth
I rise at night and sing with the moon in the sky
All I desire is to smile with you again

Timeline

Summary of Hong Kong History

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"Flight Song"

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Map Locations:

Top left: Tsing Yi

Top middle left: Mong Kok

Top middle right: Kowloon

Below Kowloon: Hung Hom

Middle: Hong Kong Island

Bottom Left: Lamma Island

Bottom Right: Beaufort Island

You have always believed

That you will hear the answer

Sometime, somewhere, surely

But eventually

I think I will give you the answer from the depths of the earth

I will give the words that have been needed for so very, very long

I will give the various answers that will resound in both heaven and earth

Afternoon Section - Opening: Destruction's Beginning and End (5:36)

Part 1

Hong Kong's destruction began.

Four giant dragons flew through the night sky and Nein Engels were gathered around them.

As if called by the dragons' roars, the earth was Tuned and flew up toward heaven.

The roads, houses, buildings, greenery, rivers, and everything else became light and sound before seeking the sky.

It truly was a show of destruction.

And Akira ran along the stage of that show.

She always chose the path leading to the weakest of the destructive Lives as she travelled west along Ma Tau Wai Road to return the way she had come and escape Hung Hom.

She was running with all her strength.

She did not turn around and she took no breaks.

Occasionally, her foot would catch on the uncertain ground and she would almost trip.

She would move her wings to balance herself, but…

"Ow…"

She would grimace at the pain in her broken wing and the wound in her side.

…I could heal that if I had my Device.

But she did not. Her trusty Device was broken and unusable.

She had lost her Device and injured her wing and body.

That was what she had accomplished in the fight against her brother.

"…"

She said nothing, looked down at her feet, and ran.

But the ground suddenly broke apart below her.

"!?"

She felt her foot break through and a fissure opened much like a gaping maw.

It was deep.

…Oh, no!

She flapped her wings on reflex.

Intense pain shot through her broken right wing and a numbing pain ran along her spine.

…Ah!

Not even she knew whether her swallowed scream was in response to the pain or the fear below her feet.

She lost her balance at the unstable movement of her wings and she fell onto her right shoulder.

She felt a dull pain and rolled two or three times along the broken asphalt.

She did not fall into the fissure, but the roll caused her right wing to ache again. That pain would not even let her pass out.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow…”

She sat up and shook her head.

Miraculously, her Yard cap remained on her head, so she adjusted its position as she stood up…until her knees began to give out underneath her.

“Ah.”

She placed her hands on her sinking knees and somehow managed to remain standing.

She took a breath, listened to the surrounding Lives again, and looked at her own body.

She had several injuries on her skin and her uniform and wings were stained all over with dust and blood.

“…”

She silently rubbed her eyes as if they were dirty too.

“I need to focus on escaping.”

She nodded and immediately heard an odd Live.

It was a distinctive Live.

It rang in her gut, had a low Tempo with a wave-like motion, and was colored a metallic gray.

It only lasted an instant, but it raced around her like a ripple.

…?

She looked up and saw the four Earth Burns dancing in the heavens while consuming Hong Kong. The Lives of destruction rang loud in the distance, but they were very different and much more harmonized than the Live she had just heard.

It had been such a strange Live that she completely forgot about the pain in her wing and frowned.

…What was that?

Just as she asked herself that, her upturned eyes saw something in the heavens.

The fire element Earth Burn that had risen from Hung Hom had its long red body split in two.

"!?"

The reason arrived after a slight delay.

It was that previous Live.

However, it was somehow different.

It was larger, it was more powerful, and its omnidirectional rippling motion had been focused in a single direction.

It was a monosyllabic shout.

She heard it as a continuous “ah”. She felt the low Tempo in her body and saw the heavy metallic Word Color.

It had to be the after-effect of the shout that had cut the dragon in two.

However…

“The after-effect is this loud? Its Octave is easily over ten million.”

The Lives of destruction vanished from her surroundings and the disintegration of the earth slowed.

“Is it over? …No, that isn’t it.”

As proof, she saw a small mountain of land and a few buildings rise into the air far to the south.

The destruction was simply shifting from the surface and into the crust.

It was only getting started.

…Then why?

It was due to the splitting of the red dragon. The Lives the dragon had destroyed had been returned to their original forms, which counteracted its continuing destruction and slowed its pace.

The split crimson dragon began a descent in order to restore the lost portion of its body.

…Who cut that dragon?

She could make a guess and she was confident that guess was correct.

“ ‘If the Earth Burn is activated, call me’, hm?”

She finally gave a slight smile.

She also slapped her knees and faced forward to begin running again.

“?”

She noticed a small figure on the broken roadway.

It was a boy in pajamas who was on the borderline between a small child and just a child.

Akira ran over to him as he slowly walked around and looked up in the sky.

She caught up in only a few seconds.

“Hey! You have to run!”

His small body gave a start and he turned toward her.

At the same time, she heard a high-pitched cry.

It was the mewing of a cat.

“Hm?”

She looked down and found the short-haired boy was holding a white cat. It seemed to be a pet because it had a red string and a bell around its neck.

She looked at the green-eyed cat and the boy and then sighed in relief.

She placed a hand on the boy’s back.

“You have to run. C’mon, you’ve stopped.”

“…”

The boy silently faced forward and began to walk.

“Run!”

She gave his back a gentle shove and he sped up.

She also began to jog while looking around to protect the boy. Taking solid steps made her right wing throb, but she could hardly complain given the situation.

She looked at the boy’s Live and lamented in her heart that she did not have her Device.

That was just how disturbed his Live was. Both in body and mind.

…*Sorry.*

She apologized only in her heart and the cat mewed once.

At the same time, the boy spoke.

“…My house.”

That was all.

Ignoring the pain in her wing, Akira looked down at him and the serious expression that looked far too mature for his age.

…*Where have I seen that expression before?*

She quickly found her answer.

When watching over J-Gun's final moments, she had read the Message of his memories from his Live.

The crying boy facing J-Gun in a destroyed city had made that same expression.

And thinking back on it…

…That boy must have been Gunmal.

She would never have imagined that kind of past based on how he acted now, but she accepted it all the same.

"…"

She remained silent for a while.

After a few breaths, she nodded toward the boy running with her and repeated herself.

"You have to run."

He nodded a few times as if accepting her words.

He then looked up at her a bit and asked a question.

"Are you from the Yard?"

"Yes, I'm part of the General's Yard."

"Where's the Great General?"

"He's waiting for everyone in the center of the city where it's safe."

"I see." The boy pouted his lips. "Then I wish I could have gotten on that motorcycle at the beginning."

“Motorcycle?”

“A delinquent was riding it with a woman. I was in my broken house and they didn’t make it in time.”

“What an awful delinquent,” she said with a bitter smile.

…That would be Kouga and Rin. I guess I’m the only one that hasn’t escaped.

Something appeared just as she frowned.

“!”

A great form flew by only ten meters overhead.

“…What!?”

“The red dragon!”

The boy was correct.

The red dragon flew by over their heads again.

The roar of its passage was much louder and more powerful than an airplane.

It was thirty meters across and, despite being sliced apart earlier, at least five hundred meters long.

It was simply on too great a scale.

…Wow.

As she thought that, the ground seemed to loosen below her feet.

“Run!” she shouted while following her own advice.

On the second step, her feet seemed to rise.

A crack ran by in front of her and the ground floated up beneath her and the boy.

The crust was being Tuned instead of just the surface.

The destruction had begun at a more fundamental spot.

Akira held the boy in her arms and leaped.

She glanced backwards just once while in midair and saw something she wished she had not.

Far, far down Ma Tau Wai Road, about five hundred meters behind her, the red dragon's head had dropped to the surface.

…It's so big.

From this distance, she judged its head to be at least thirty meters across and over forty meters tall if the horn was included.

And bestial eyes glowed yellow in that massive face.

…It's looking this way?

She felt like she could sense its gaze on her and her wings trembled lightly.

"…"

The earth swelled up behind her, blocking the red dragon from view.

She and the boy landed and hit the ground running.

She was now certain she felt the dragon's gaze on her.

Despite the wall of earth behind her, the Live of its gaze reached her through it.

There was no doubting it.

Its gaze sent a disturbing Live her way. Its Word Color was an oddly warm purplish-red, its Tempo was much like a pulse, and it contained an unpleasantly sticky Message.

It was much like the curious looks she often received around town just for being a Nein Engel.

The red dragon was interested in her.

More than wondering why, she sensed the panic in the boy.

…*Oh, no.*

She pushed on his back and spoke.

“Listen. Run as fast as you can without looking back.”

“Eh?”

He started to turn toward her, but she placed her Yard cap on his head.

“Don’t look. If you hear something or start to see something, cover your eyes with the brim of my cap.”

“Why?”

“It’s like a magic charm. If you do that, you won’t be scared.”

“Eh?”

That monosyllabic question was interrupted by the crust being destroyed underfoot once more.

The ground was rising like a pillar.

“C’mon, run!”

Akira shouted and jumped backwards.

The cat in the boy’s arms gave a quick mew as if to say goodbye.

Several pillars of earth rose between her and the boy, creating a wall to separate them.

The street swelled up like a hill and Akira descended the opposite side.

Having turned back, she saw the red dragon.

The crimson dragon was stretched along the road and its long tail still flowed through the sky.

She descended the rising hill and stood on some of the limited flat ground still remaining.

She was surrounded by tilted ground, pillars of earth, and the foundations and walls of the houses and buildings still attached.

“Instead of simply breaking it all down, it’s destroyed and devoured. My brother’s dragon really is cruel.”

She then realized why the red dragon was focused on her.

“My brother.”

When an object was Tuned into another form, it would give shape to the Tuner's Message.

And the Message was the Tuner's thoughts, including the elements of emotion.

"And that includes hostility."

After that monotone comment, she bit her lower lip.

At the same time, the ground shook.

She looked forward and saw the red dragon moving.

It was moving forward, toward her.

Part 2

Hong Kong's destruction continued.

Above the earth, city, and sea in four directions, a crazed performance was underway that mixed together all sorts of sounds.

The volume and sound quality was a lot like the roar of a waterfall.

Asphalt, water, wind, plants, light, and fire were all broken down and carried upwards.

But there was a restful place from which the party of destruction could be seen in all four directions.

It was a band of land that included Hong Kong Cave and portions of Kowloon's business district and administrative district.

Rin and Kouga had indicated that this area would not be harmed when the massive four Tune Emblems were activated.

It was a narrow strip of land.

The roads were overflowing with cars trying to escape destruction and crowded with people seeking help.

The destruction of Hung Hom's thermal power station had cut the city's lights by two-thirds and the partial lighting only accentuated the darkness of the night.

Sounds of destruction, the roars of the dragons, the rumbling of cars, the fear of the people, and the Lives of all those things filled the area as densely as water in the depths of the ocean.

Nathan Road cut vertically through Hong Kong and its northern end was normally the quiet border between the business district and administrative district, but it was no exception.

The General's Tank Force was buried among the cars like stones in a river and could not move.

"This has really turned into somethin' else," muttered the General with his upper body sticking out of his Grant's turret.

He had driven down the center passing lane to keep his field of vision open, but now he could not budge from there.

He glanced up at the three dragons in the sky and sighed.

"I guess what was taken isn't comin' back."

Those dragons had been made from Huang Daquan's blood.

His blood had contained Yang Lives, so the dragons would not return to Hong Kong even if the Tuning was dispelled. They would combine with heaven, which was filled with the same power.

“The red one was actin’ strange earlier and I heard an odd Live, but that won’t be enough.”

He lightly shook his head and squeezed the speaker microphone in his hand.

“Um, no one in this street is to move. Put your hands up and I can at least say you won’t die.”

He sighed.

Rare for him, he frowned, crossed his arms, and looked around with narrowed eyes as if he were unsure what to do.

He then heard something strange.

It was a Live of silence.

He could hear Lives of destruction and screaming in the distance and he could hear rumbling engines from much closer by, but despite all the surrounding noise and people, there was not a great din.

“Is that ‘cause of my influence?”

He smiled bitterly.

“I guess it was the same durin’ that Divine Punishment War. The Tune Emblem is different from the secret technique used then, but it’s funny that it’s the son doin’ it this time.”

He gently stroked the scar on his cheek.

“The mother created by Huang and the son that became Huang’s protégé, huh? I just hope it’ll be stopped the way it was during Hu’s time, and not like it was during mine.”

Once he said that, he heard a familiar, loud sound.

It was a motorcycle engine.

And he heard the actual sound rather than the Live.

“Kouga!?”

That was exactly who he saw when he turned around.

Kouga was driving his motorcycle through the congestion, but he was not using the road or the sidewalk.

He was driving straight along the Nathan Road’s central divider.

The General saw someone on the back of the motorcycle.

Based on the Word Color of the Live, he could tell it was Rin.

“The Tempo’s a little weak for Rin, though.”

The motorcycle shot toward him with enough speed to blow away that concern.

But despite the speed, it was accurately controlled.

The Live of Kouga’s panicked gaze pierced through the General.

“What is it?”

As soon as the General spoke up, the motorcycle came to a rapid stop.

The tires screeched and blue smoke blew out.

The back wheel hopped up a bit, the motorcycle skidded a little past the General's Grant, and it came to a stop.

Kouga hopped off and picked Rin up from the back.

He had not lowered the kickstand, so the motorcycle slid and toppled over, but he ignored it and shouted to the General.

"General, you've gotta Tune her!"

The General caught on as soon as he saw Rin in the man's arms.

The woman's right leg was missing from the knee down.

Part 3

Hong Kong's destruction was approaching its climax.

The black earth dragon, the green wood dragon, and the blue water dragon were already flying about high in the night sky and the Nein Engels decorated their surroundings like stars.

Where they had left the earth, the surface had torn away and muddy seawater was filling the great holes left behind.

There were no more Lives rising from those places.

The red dragon alone had yet to ascend. It calmly floated over the land of Hung Hom. It smashed the earth, swallowed the greenery and wind, and restored its torn body.

Its prey was Akira.

In a single word, she was exhausted.

She had removed her uniform's coat and all she could do was run and jump.

Even when running at full speed, the great dragon could fill the gap with the slightest of actions.

A few times, it had caught up to her and just about crushed her or devoured her.

However, she was much too small for the dragon. It would misjudge the distance and bite at the wrong spot or drop its maw in the wrong area.

"But I still can't take much more of this," she sighed while weakly running along.

She had tripped and slammed against the ground or rocky walls so often that she could no longer feel the pain in her right wing.

…Have I knocked myself silly?

As she had that overly carefree thought, she heard a heavy Live behind her.

She looked back and saw the red dragon's face.

"!"

The Live of its gaze pierced into her body and she escaped it by moving to the right.

She ran and a giant red wall burst through the spot she had just vacated.

The dragon bent its neck while practically lying on the ground.

It turned its head toward Akira.

"…!?"

The yellow light of its eyes faced Akira and the Live racing from it was no longer one of curiosity.

This intense red Word Color and low rumbling Tempo belonged to a Live of fury.

And she had no weapon with which to deflect that Live.

She felt a squeezing in her heart as her own Live was crushed and nearly broken by that fury.

If it broke, this was all over. That would mean her Live had been Busted.

Her voice escaped her throat, but it did not reach the level of a scream.

"You have to be kidding me!"

It was only a small shout, but it helped her regain a grip on her own Live.

…Calm down.

Instead of calming her Live with Tuning, she created the rhythm of a song.

This was the Flight Song that she had known for a very long time and it flowed through her heart.

“彼街通天地

“墜朝地仰雲

“昇夜空謳月

“惟望再笑君”

As she sang, strength returned to her gaze and she used that strength to force back the dragon’s gaze.

Her feet had nearly stopped, but they began moving again.

The dragon reacted to her movement.

It released a furious protest at the recovery of its nearly defeated prey. It opened its fang-lined mouth and released a voice of pure attack rather than words or breath.

It was a roar.

“!”

The great noise nearly blew Akira away.

“…Kh!”

But she held her ground.

She sensed a presence behind her.

“What!?”

She turned only her head and saw an earthen wall that had not been there before.

Called by the dragon's cry, it had risen from the ground as if by springs.

By the time she noticed, it was too late.

Shock and pain ran through her back and wings, but it did not end there.

She did her best to not lose her balance, but the rising earth proved too much for her.

A cylindrical pillar of earth jutted up with the speed of an elevator.

Akira lost to that inertia and collapsed onto her back.

"Ow!"

For a winged Nein Engel, falling onto her back was filled with only pain and fear. She felt instinctual fear at having her defenseless stomach turned toward the nearly empty night sky.

She raised her head in a frantic attempt to get up and she saw the red dragon's face.

She had been raised from the ground by a few meters, so there was nothing to obstruct the dragon's gaze.

From the dragon's point of view, she was nothing but an offering.

…*Oh, no.*

The dragon must have noticed what she was thinking because it smiled.

An unpleasant chill ran down her back and she trembled.

She felt a reflexive urge to run, but her body would not move.

Her arms, legs, and torso seemed pinned to the ground.

…*Eh?*

Her will responded to her question, but her body did not.

She was exhausted and her body had given up, regardless of her will.

She gasped at this unexpected betrayal and looked to the enemy.

It raised its head and opened its maw with the other three dragons and the Nein Engels flying in the night sky behind it.

And it rushed toward her.

"!"

She could not even scream.

Her voice refused to come out.

Only her thoughts raced through her heart.

The wordless thoughts powerfully raced into the sky in pure Live form.

Only one person in the entire world heard that rushing Live.

And he responded.

He responded by blowing the dragon away from the side.

She heard a great rumbling.

"…!?"

When the great dragon's face was only around a dozen meters from her, a gust of wind struck it from the side. Instead of a light impact, that wind was enough of an attack to knock it onto its side.

And something much more crucial reached her a moment later: a distinctive Live.

It rang in her gut, had a low Tempo with a wave-like motion, and was colored a metallic gray.

It had blown the red dragon away.

…It can't be.

She glanced around, but before she found anything, she felt something solid touching her back and below the knees.

A moment later, she was lifted up from those points.

"Eh?"

"Don't act so confused."

She looked up and saw Gunmal's face before her eyes.

Part 4

Hong Kong's destruction was approaching its conclusion.

The red dragon writhed along the earth from the unexpected attack, Akira did not lose her life, and Gunmal held her in his right arm.

His blue eyes looked at her and he finally smiled bitterly.

"You should've called me sooner. How else am I gonna know where you are?"

"…"

She looked silently at his face.

He started to say something more, but tilted his head at the awkwardness in her gaze.

He then jumped from the raised earth below his feet.

He landed lightly and immediately began running.

Finally, Akira managed to speak.

"Wh-what about the dragon?"

"It's no use. It's gotten even bigger than before. I was trying to blow off its head, but it didn't work."

"It's no use?"

"I'm still a little rusty. And personally, I think knocking that thing away is a pretty amazing feat."

"That's true," she agreed.

He glanced behind them.

“I guess it’s about over.”

“Eh?”

In the same breath as her question, the earth around them began rising.

It was time for the dragon’s ascent.

The earth came from the crust and was Tuned.

“The Tuner’s ability, the Devices, the Tune Emblems, the blood of an Archs, and dragons that destroy the earth to further develop themselves. They’ve used a ton of methods to increase the Octave they can control.”

“This is no time for casual commentary. A-are we going to make it?”

The earth was torn deeply next to them and it flew up toward the sky.

He looked down at her.

“We will. I created a path before the destruction resumed.”

“A path?”

“It’s just like making a Device. I just forged the earth a little.”

“Enough to keep that dragon from destroying it? You have to be joking.”

But she could decide whether he was joking or not after they safely escaped Hung Hom.

She sighed and he asked her a question.

“Why didn’t you escape right away?”

“Eh?”

“You had time after I cut the red dragon, right?”

“Well…” She hesitated and lowered her eyes. “I was held up by some things.”

He then spoke to her.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

She looked up to ask him what he wanted and he kissed her.

“…!”

She was surprised, but before long…

“…”

She fell silent.

She felt it was inappropriate, but she closed her eyes and surrendered herself to him.

The contact between their lips allowed him to forcibly read her Live.

That irritatingly pleasant activity ended after only two seconds.

Perhaps due to having her vision cut off, the wet sensation of his parting lips seemed especially distinct.

When she heard his voice, it was too close for any other sounds to get in the way.

"I see." He took a breath. "So you were saving a kid. You can tell people about that kind of thing, you know? And I'm not talking about what suits you or not. I guess…well…I sort of like that kind of thing."

"Yeah."

"And I also wanted to know why you're dressed so sexily."

"Eh?"

"That torn clothing is pretty erotic, you know?'

"What are you talking about?"

She frowned and opened her eyes.

He was looking straight forward.

Huh? she thought.

…Didn't he just say something?

There was no sign of that left in him, but he looked down at her a bit.

"Go to sleep," he said. "You're tired, aren't you? Then go to sleep. Once you wake up, you'll probably be in a hospital bed."

"But…"

"Don't worry about it." He smiled a little and picked up his pace. "It's a straight shot from here, so get some rest."

As if in response, the red dragon roared behind them.

That signaled the conclusion of Hong Kong's destruction.

Interlude 1

Rin awoke in the night.

"…?"

Her body awoke before her mind.

Her eyes opened, but her vision was hollow and unclear.

She dug back into her memories based on her senses and found herself lying on her back when she should have been sitting on a motorcycle.

…Where am I?

Only her body could answer her.

Something warm and solid was wrapped around her right arm from the elbow down.

And she felt nothing below the knee of her right leg.

She closed her eyes and listened to the Lives.

All across her body, she sensed the cold blue Lives of injury.

Her right arm was broken and held in a hard cast.

…A cast? So is this a hospital?

She accepted that question as the answer and gave a sigh of relief.

She listened to her slightly rapid pulse and to her own body's Live.

She could not sense her Live from below her right knee, but the rest of the leg was not emitting the blue Word Color of injury.

…My Live has stabilized.

Her body had accepted the loss.

…Well, not even Tuning can add on what was lost.

She spoke in her heart and slowly opened her eyes.

She vaguely saw a white room in the darkness.

As expected, it was a hospital room.

"…"

The glow-in-the-dark hands of the clock on the wall told her it was nearly two in the morning.

A glowing digital calendar was contained near the center of the clock face, so she knew it was June 17.

…So only six hours have passed since Hong Kong was destroyed.

She realized that her body and mind both wanted sleep.

The waking effect of her panicked mind had gone, so the power of the anesthesia was returning.

She used her unfocused mind to think.

The dragons of the four elements had activated.

On the night of June 30, the Nein Engels would use the acceleration of the four elements to activate the Earth Serpent.

Fearing that fact, some would choose to flee and some would choose to fight.

She suddenly spoke.

“Why did I survive to see this through to the end?”

Her voice vanished unheard into the corner of the room.

She smiled bitterly and closed her eyes.

Sleep was quickly taking hold.

“I’m exhausted.”

Thinking she would take action once this exhaustion left her, she fell back to sleep.

Act 2: Progress of the Seven Word Song (7:18)

Part 1

A week had passed.

It was noon on June 23 and Akira was walking through the lobby of a large hospital in Hong Kong's Kowloon district.

She wore a new Yard uniform and a new spear Device hung at her waist.

She and her clothes were completely unharmed.

She had been hospitalized ever since the day of Hong Kong's destruction.

In addition to her broken wing, she had apparently cracked her ribs at some point. She had been more passed out than asleep when she had been brought in, so she had not noticed at the time. However, she had received a few large-scale Tune treatments before she woke up.

The female Tuner doctor who had treated her had spoken to her when she had woken.

"You were lucky."

And…

"You received good first aid and the General ordered us to give you top priority above the other injured. Your wing will be as good as new, so you should thank the people who brought you here."

Despite the harshness of the doctor's words, they had not included a sharp Live.

Akira had shrunk down on the bed and smiled bitterly.

The doctor had stroked Akira's wings.

"I didn't say it was wrong. Of everyone I treated, your injuries were the worst."

The woman had added "Aren't you glad?", which had made Akira shrink down even further.

She was happy to be released from the hospital, but more because she could leave than because she had recovered.

As she walked through the lobby, she saw the conspicuous white of bandages here and there. Most of the patients in the hospital were surgery patients.

Also, she felt their eyes on her.

"…"

She thought they were curious looks at first, but they were not. Their Word Color was a pale red and their Tempo was faint but heavy.

These were Lives of hostility.

Their weak but definite presence shocked her.

When she turned around, the humans and Glossolalians standing or sitting in the lobby all looked away.

The Lives of hostility vanished, too.

None of them were looking at Akira.

She bit her lower lip and turned toward the hospital's main entrance.

She spotted a small shop to the side of the large glass doors.

There was no one working there.

She stood in front of the shop and looked around, but there really was no sign of a clerk.

"Maybe because it's noon?"

She tilted her head and checked through the pockets of her uniform's coat.

She felt some change.

She intentionally rattled the coins around so everyone around her would know she was setting them on the counter and she reached for the newspaper rack.

She noticed something once she prepared to choose one.

"These are the only ones?"

There had always been dozens of different papers put out every day, but there were only six today.

They were printed only in black and red, so they lacked their usual ambition.

She grabbed the paper she always saw in the Yard and then she walked off.

While opening the newspaper, she opened the glass door with her fingertips and stepped outside.

The clear sunlight illuminated her body and the blowing wind seemed almost too perfect.

Something was wrong.

This was not Hong Kong's usual light and wind.

"But that couldn't be."

She lightly shook her head as if she did not want to accept something.

However, the changes could be clearly seen. The cityscape visible from this central Kowloon hospital had grown shorter and the outlines of collapsed buildings were clearly visible even in the distance.

…There's no smoke or heat created by people.

As her gaze moved south along the Kowloon Peninsula, she noticed the city's shadow growing narrower. When the Earth Burns had ascended, they had torn into the east and west sides of the peninsula.

These were the scars left by those Earth Burns.

"I can't believe this."

After making sure there was no one else around, she let her shoulders droop.

She sighed and continued walking.

This was close to her apartment in Mong Kok. It was just far enough to finish reading the newspaper by the time she arrived home.

She looked down to the paper in order to fill the time and she read the headline on page one: Ripples in the Relationship between Britain and China.

The transformation of Hong Kong and restoration of heaven has been called the Sixth Divine Punishment War. China has placed all blame on Britain, but Britain is denying all responsibility. There reasoning is as follows:

・This incident was a terrorist act committed without the knowledge or approval of the state.

・Hong Kong is still British territory, so it is none of China's concern what happens there. Even if Hong Kong is moved to heaven, it does not change the size of Britain's territory, so there is nothing for other nations to accuse them of.

・If anyone in China can confirm heaven's state now that Hong Kong has been transformed, Britain will allow them to investigate.

・And if any Chinese were harmed in Hong Kong, Britain wishes to apologize and is prepared to provide any appropriate compensation requested."

…I see.

"They handled that well," muttered Akira.

Britain was clearly reacting after the fact and there were slight contradictions in their statements, but they had found a logical escape route.

“No matter how many people died, they were British citizens, so this will be handled as a domestic British issue.”

If heaven was restored, their souls could be saved.

It was a rough method, but…

“It’s all they have.”

It was because their methods looked a lot like a sudden accident that everything was progressing with ex-post-facto approval.

There had been too much political pressure to act out in the open from the beginning. No matter how noble their goal might be, they could not drive out the people living in the city and obliterate such a vast area of land.

“So it only works because Britain is prepared to stand their ground and argue their case. And if Britain denies responsibility here…”

Rin had already predicted the next ceremony. And even if that ceremony created the metal element Earth Serpent that would carry the rest of the land to heaven, Britain would be able to argue their way out of it in the same way.

…Who thought up this plan? My brother? Or Huang Daquan?

As she pondered that, she flipped to the second page of the newspaper. What she saw written there depressed her.

The headline read, “The Number of Victims is Enormous”.

Number of Victims: Dead – 600,000. Seriously Injured – 1,300,000. Missing – 800,000.

Lost Land: Hong Kong Island and 70% of the Kowloon Peninsula.

Total Damages: An estimated 69 billion HKD (and still rising).

"This is like the result of a war. …These numbers don't feel real at all."

…If you include the areas outside the city center, Hong Kong's total population was about five million, wasn't it?

More than half of that had been affected. At least one in eight had died and one in two or three had been otherwise harmed.

…Was this all part of their calculations?

Even long ago when their family had all been together, her brother had talked about restoring heaven and had researched the issue.

And his method was exactly what Akira had always wished to do: sending out a dragon.

"So he beat me to it. What a shame."

Her voice was light, but her expression was stiff. She remembered what her brother had said on the night the dragons had taken flight.

He had said the following about Hong Kong's destruction:

"That is reality."

She bit her lower lip as she thought about what that meant.

She heard several airplanes flying by far above her lowered head.

"…? Things have gotten a lot louder since I was hospitalized."

…Well, it's an emergency, so there's bound to be a lot they have to do.

With that thought, she crumpled up the newspaper, threw it to the ground, and kicked it.

She saw Mong Kok's shopping district up ahead.

That was her home.

Or it should have been.

Part 2

Hong Kong Cave was dead.

After the Sixth Divine Punishment War in which most of Hong Kong had been destroyed, a five-day investigation by the Yard and investigators from various nations had not found a single Nein Engel there.

All they had found were the newly-abandoned ruins.

However, the air began to move in that pit that now lacked even those investigators.

The surface was sunny and the air was warm.

That warm air flowed down into Hong Kong Cave and gained a damp, green smell as it came into contact with the darkness.

It sank into the pit and slowly gathered at the bottom as if piling up, but instead of becoming air, it rotated and whirled around the spring at the lowest level.

It created a slight wind.

That wind contained gentle warmth.

Two people let that wind wash over them on the edge of the spring.

One was a large man wearing a combat jacket the same color as the shadows accumulated on the lowest level.

In contrast, the other was a six-winged Nein Engel wearing a white coat that reflected light even in those same shadows.

They were Fei the Galgallin and Double Lee the Seraph.

These were the Nein Engels who had caused the Sixth Divine Punishment War.

Neither of them moved.

Fei remained standing and Double Lee remained sitting on the edge of the spring. They simply stared silently up into the shadows of Hong Kong Cave.

They could not see the light of the surface from three kilometers deep.

Since the creation of the hole, a number of structures had been created to cover everything up and hide the residents from the outside.

Still, they stared intently upwards.

Double Lee was the first to move.

He opened his mouth and said something.

That something was a question.

“Is Genius still not done?”

“There were a lot of rooms on that floor. It will take some time on her own.”

“She only has to place charms for the final ceremony in the four cardinal directions, but I guess that isn’t easy with such a large space.”

“It is necessary, so she has to do it.”

Double Lee looked down and laughed bitterly at Fei’s clear tone, void of all cruelty or concern.

“Ha ha. It’s been a week since most of Hong Kong was sent to heaven, so it’s sad that what you consider ‘necessary’ still isn’t complete.”

“Should we hasten our preparations?”

“I would really hate to rush this and make a mistake. But anyway, it looks like we can turn Hong Kong Cave into the site of the final ceremony by the end of the day. As for the remaining week…”

“We must stop anyone who would get in our way before the night Hong Kong is returned to China and we must acquire J-Gun Maldrick’s most powerful Device.”

Double Lee gave a small shrug.

“Sorry for making you wait this long. It took me an entire week to make the charms to use here which slowed down the setup for J-Gun’s Device.”

“That was unavoidable. Just like President Huang’s death, everything is a race against time. And, Double Lee, you have not slept much for the past few days, have you?”

“Because I’m still too inexperienced. If I had more power, I could have cut out the need for these extra preparations.”

“You do have power.”

“Not as much as you think I do. Just to start up the dragons, I needed the Tune Emblem and a powerful Device.”

“…”

“Yin and Yang lie at the foundation of Tuning and Busting. Ancient Tuners and Busters could easily draw those out from light and darkness. Not only that, but they could even play the Lives of time and space. But look at the modern Tuners and Busters.”

He fell silent and thought for a moment.

“Even I need Master Huang’s blood to obtain the power of Yang.”

“That is because of the Death Techno. Approximately seventy percent of the information related to Tuning and Busting was destroyed during the World Wars and the Divine Punishment Wars, so sending out dragons is worthy of praise in the present time.”

“That’s a nice consolation.”

“It is not a consolation; it is a relative evaluation,” readily corrected Fei. “You are growing faint of heart. Do you feel bad about destroying most of Hong Kong?”

“Of course not. My parents did something far worse.”

“Unfortunately, I have no detailed information on your parents.”

“Are you sure about that? …Fei, do you know the Flight Song?”

Fei nodded.

“That city connects heaven and earth. …It is the most well-known song in this city.”

“Yes, and it was created right here. Whenever a book introduces the Flight Song, it always has a picture of humans standing by this spring and looking up. Just like we were doing earlier.”

With that said, Double Lee once more looked up toward the heavens. Fei looked in the same direction.

“Can you see down here, Fei?”

Double Lee’s question was a simple one.

Fei’s answer was also a simple one.

“It would be a problem if I could not.”

The Galgallin had customized the majority of his body, so he stated that as if it were obvious.

On the other hand, Double Lee smiled bitterly and lowered his gaze.

His eyes turned from heaven and stopped on the monument next to the spring.

That mossy stone monument was engraved with the Flight Song.

Double Lee confirmed via Lives that Fei had turned in the same direction.

“Don’t you find it interesting?”

“The Flight Song?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Fei, I have long thought about this song’s meaning. I thought and thought and thought.”

“I am aware. When President Huang first met you, that was the first thing you asked about.”

“I see you’re remembering old times again.”

“President Huang smiled and did not answer, but did he tell you in the end?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And you will not tell us?”

Double Lee lightly answered through body language.

He narrowed his eyes, twisted his lips a little, and simply smiled.

He finally opened that smile and produced some calm words that he seemed to have prepared in advance.

“Some things are best left unknown.”

“…”

The two fell silent.

Double Lee stood up and walked over to the monument carved with the Flight Song.

He arrived after one, two, three steps and reached out a hand.

He could be heard peeling moss away and he lowered his head.

His next words were directed toward the stones paving the ground.

“If you think about it carefully, it is a simple matter. …Why doesn’t Hong Kong truly connect heaven and earth like the song says?”

“Because the Divine Punishment Wars created a gap between the humans and the Glossolalians.”

“Between the humans and the Glossolalians?”

“The humans crated Hong Kong Cave because they feared the Glossolalians. If not for that fearful avoidance, this place would not exist and neither would we as we are…or I as I am.”

“I see. An excellent guess.”

“That is the general opinion of all historians for the past century.”

“Even that last part? …I can’t imagine you without your customized body.”

“I only know this version of myself.”

“Archs RDC Security Division’s Active Duty Section 1 Commander and Division Commander…Fei Garland. When customizing your body, you received a Psyche Outer surgery and lost all of your memories. But…”

“My past remained.”

“Could you not kill her? I looked into it. Her Urban Name is Rin, but her Wild Name is Feng Ling. She’s a detective who made a name for

herself as one of the Yard's searchers, but she's also a Tuner. Comparing her history to yours, your old self would have met her well before five years ago. And…when you parted ways, she was not even twenty."

"How strange. You know more about me than I do."

"She would know even more. …So could you not get rid of her…no, of your past?"

"Could you?"

"I'm the same as you. In more ways than one," said Double Lee. "And so is Hong Kong."

"?"

"No one can erase the past. And in its prediction of the coming future – to return to our previous topic – the Flight Song does not match up with Hong Kong's past."

"We already discussed this."

"What the historians think does not matter. I don't care that they believe the song was created and sung as some faint hope for the people being sealed below the earth."

He laughed quietly, and…

"Such ridiculous sympathy."

He looked up and his expression changed slightly.

“Genius is here.”

A quiet flapping reached them like the spilling of sand.

A four-winged female Nein Engel descended down the center of the pit.

It was Genius.

“Were you waiting long?”

She landed on the spring. The tips of her toes sank into the pure water and she vibrated the wings extended both up and down in order to remain afloat.

She looked down but could not see the bottom of the spring. The bottomless hole looked like a gaping maw below her.

“Double Lee… You’ll perform the final ceremony here, won’t you?”

“Yes. I will drive the Baton into the water right where you are standing.”

“So the metal element dragon lives in the depths of the earth. …This is going to be destructive.”

“If I only had more power, I could have used a more peaceful method.”

“Peaceful destruction?”

“That’s not a very nice way of putting it. …But regardless, I had to send the four elements in advance to start up the metal dragon. I have no choice but to follow those fundamental rules.”

Double Lee laughed bitterly with no harshness in his expression.

Fei asked Genius something without looking away from Double Lee.

“How are your preparations going? …The preparations other than the charms.”

“J-Gun is working in the workshop below the Archs RDC building and the building is entirely empty. The contract is working perfectly.”

“Master Huang did a good job of setting everything up. We informed them in advance this land would be blown away, but in exchange for letting us go through with it, we gave them a portion of what we own in the foreign markets, not Hong Kong’s market.”

“A good decision,” said Fei without turning away from Double Lee. “Double Lee, you said that, when the Flight Song predicted the coming future, it did not match up with Hong Kong.”

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

Genius tilted her head and Double Lee smiled a little.

“That is what we were discussing. …So what about it, Fei?”

“How do you view President Huang’s instructions that continue to match up with Hong Kong even after his death?”

“They are the formula to reach the answer.”

“The answer? Is your answer the restoration of heaven?”

“Do we have anything else?”

“I am not talking about us. I am talking about you personally.”

“What about for you personally? Or for Genius personally? …No, not just that. That is what it was for Master Huang as well. And in the end, that objective is the one thing bringing us together.”

“I see. And you are fine with that?”

Double Lee’s answer made it sound like it was a stupid question.

“What else could there be?”

He also looked Fei in the eye.

For an instant, a metallic tone sounded in reality. The Lives of their gazes had collided.

Fei seemed to have lost to that sound because he looked away. His gaze wandered a bit before stopping on the Flight Song monument next to the spring.

“Double Lee,” he said. “You know everything, you have great power, and you desire something that we don’t more powerfully than we do anything. But you never try to fit in with us and people would likely call you…”

He thought for a moment.

“Pitiable.”

Fei went on to add that he did not understand that kind of emotion.

No one said anything after that.

Double Lee and Genius did not agree with or deny it.

The wind simply blew.

Part 3

Destroyed.

That single word described the state of Akira's apartment.

It was not that the entire apartment building had been destroyed. Her home – that is, her room – was the only one destroyed.

She noticed as soon as she unlocked and opened the door.

Light from the window reflected off the white porcelain fragments and rounded glass shards covering the old wooden flooring of the small kitchen.

The pieces of blackened boards in the shadows on the floor had originally been the cupboards and the toppled pillar by the wall was the refrigerator with its door torn off.

There was also graffiti spray-painted on the walls, broken lights, and every other kind of destruction imaginable.

"What…is this?"

As she muttered those words in the entranceway, the Lives remaining in the room stroked her cheeks.

Attracted by the outside wind, those residual Lives tried to escape the room. Their Word Color was the dark red of molten metal and the Tempo following that red was a loud, racing pulse.

These were Lives of hatred.

"With Lives this dense, several people must have done this."

She weakly nodded in acceptance of what had happened.

"Because I'm a Nein Engel…they thought I was a part of my brother's group."

…*They were taking revenge.*

She also remembered the Lives of the patients staring at her in the hospital lobby.

Those had been lighter than the hatred left here, but they had still contained hostility.

"…"

She placed a hand on her chest to contain her rising pulse.

The Lives of hatred were disturbing her own Live.

She took two, then four deep breaths.

"This kind of thing happens all the time."

As soon as she gave that emotionless comment, she noticed someone standing right next to her.

She had not expected them there.

"!?"

She was shocked to find how defenseless she was and she reflexively reached for the Device at her waist.

She turned around and swiftly brought the person into view.

"My landlord?"

That was exactly who was there.

The middle-aged woman wearing a green dress was the landlord of Akira's apartment and she peered into Akira's room.

"Are you okay, Akira?"

"Yes, I'm fine. But…"

"That's some rotten luck."

"Yes, it is. …But who did this and why?"

"It's unthinkable what happened to your room." The landlord closed her eyes and gave a sympathetic nod. "I think it was the night two days after that new Divine Punishment War. That would be five days ago. A group showed up as they were preparing to flee to the mainland because of what happened to Hong Kong. …I think there were about twenty of them."

"And they did all this?"

"I was shocked when I noticed the next morning, but I can't tell you exactly what happened."

"I suppose not."

As she responded to the landlord, Akira realized her Live was oddly still.

…I'm trying to ignore the emotion of anger.

She felt bad doing this to the landlord, but she could see the woman's Live.

She could not read it, but she could hear and see the Live coming from her body and that told her what emotions she was feeling.

The landlord's Live was currently playing fast and yellow.

It was a Live of panic.

…*She's lying.*

To be sure, Akira checked on the main entrance's doorknob.

There was no sign of damage to the lock or of the doorknob being replaced.

Someone had led the destroyers into her home.

…*This kind of thing happens all the time.*

She accepted it with that thought.

She ignored the landlord who was continuing to talk next to her and she stepped into her own room.

She switched on the light out of habit and heard a sound much like tearing paper come from the ceiling.

The broken light had short-circuited.

"Well, you still have power here. …What will you do, Akira?"

"Maybe I should leave."

"No, you can stay if you want. …We'll be leaving this city, too."

“Then what will happen here?” Akira turned around with a hand on the door leading to the living room in the back. “What will happen to this apartment?”

“Britain bought them all. They didn’t pay very much, though. …Still, I think we’ll be using that money to move to the mainland.”

“…”

Akira said nothing in response, but the landlord continued speaking.

“You probably haven’t heard, but the only things functioning in the city center are the emergency hospitals, the Yard, and some slight distribution of supplies. Everyone else has fled to the shelter in the New Territories.”

“They all fled?”

“Yes. The state set up a shelter – really just a tent city – in the New Territories twenty kilometers from here. There’s apparently a distribution center there, too.”

“…”

“VIPs from Britain and other countries are supposedly using that as their base. …You hear all the planes flying around, right? People are moving to other countries and that shelter is the only place where you can arrange for a flight out.”

“You’re running-…moving away, aren’t you?”

“Yes. My son and his wife have already gone there and we’re thinking of settling down in Broad City – Shanghai now that it’s been liberated.

…The resident of the next room over and the Ban family down below are all doing the same."

"This is the only place I have… Could I maybe stay?"

"That's fine by me." The landlord's Live remained unchanged, but her tone grew brighter. "Think of it as making up for what happened to your room. At the very last, no one's going to complain about someone living here for the week until Hong Kong is returned to China. If you like, why not move down into the Ban family's room?"

Akira replied with silence.

"…"

She turned the doorknob and opened the way to the living room.

As soon as she did, she lost her sense of sight.

"…!?"

At first, she did not know what it was before her eyes.

It was darkness.

But it was not actual darkness. Light from the window was definitely filling the room.

That meant she was seeing Lives with a black Word Color that had the same density as darkness.

"No…"

She instinctually drew back.

Drawn by her movement, the Lives filling the living room flowed out.

She pressed her shoulder against the side of the door so they would not touch her.

She squeezed her wings shut, crossed her arms tightly, and held her own body.

She saw the pitch black stream at her feet swell up like a swarm of snakes and swim outside.

…That's an amazing amount of chaos.

The Word Color resembled the detonation of a Discord Bomb and its Tempo was not uniform. The Word Color that looked like darkness was probably formed from a variety of Word Colors packed together in the small room.

She could not see the individual emotions.

It was a disturbing mixture of Lives.

However, the room slowly came into view as they flowed outside.

"Is everything okay?" asked the landlord behind her.

…If everything was okay, there wouldn't be any Lives like this left here.

She hung her head and glanced inside the room. The living room had doubled as her bedroom, but it was now utterly destroyed.

Books, glass shards, and scraps of cloth were strewn across the floor and the walls were covered in lacquer spray graffiti of colors reminiscent of internal organs.

These were the scars of revenge.

Akira sighed.

“I need to clean up.”

She took a step forward while ignoring all of the worried-sounding comments from the landlord behind her. She walked toward the back of the room where some of the darkness remained.

Her feet felt like lead weights.

Part 4

Five hours went by.

Cleaning the room proved extremely difficult.

First of all, Akira had no cleaning supplies.

The vacuum cleaner had been thrown through the living room window and onto the balcony and the broom seemed to have been used as a weapon to destroy the room.

“Humans are so uncivilized.”

However, that light joke was not going to change the situation.

The resident of the neighboring room had apparently moved to the mainland, so she finally decided to enter that room through the window and borrow their cleaning supplies.

“Getting ready is a job in and of itself.”

As she began to clean, she noticed a few things.

“The city’s Live is so calm.”

There were barely any Lives being emitted even in the shopping district.

She could tell that by looking out the window.

Most of the stores there had no merchandise on the shelves. There was only the occasional shop with stocked shelves and the owner would be sitting alone by the street, looking bored.

“The channels of distribution have been cut off, haven’t they?”

She moved her gaze to the road down below.

There was dried mud and a thin coating of white powder on the asphalt.

She initially thought it was sand, but it was not.

It was salt.

The seawater had come this far.

When the dragons had flown, Hong Kong’s land had been torn away in the four cardinal directions and seawater had flowed into the crust.

“Liquefaction, hm?”

There had been a large near-field earthquake and a hole five kilometers deep. The after effects had been devastating.

The coastal areas had collapsed like a landslide and then a thirty meter wall of water had crashed into it all.

“That’s probably what happened to most of the missing.”

As soon as she said that, she heard the air trembling in the distance from another airplane.

She ignored it and resumed cleaning her room.

She had already carried out or swept out the bed, the bedding slashed with a blade, the broken bookshelf, the torn books, and all the broken glass.

“I can’t believe this…”

There was no strength in her voice as she removed the broken lightbulbs.

“What happened to my sanxian and photo?”

She could not find the sanxian her father had given her or the only photograph she had of her family.

She cleaned every nook and cranny of the room and checked every splinter of wood and scrap of paper, but they were nowhere to be found.

…Were they thrown out the window?

The vacuum cleaner had been caught on the balcony, but the photo and sanxian may have fallen to the road.

…And if they did…

“I’d never find them.”

She sighed and walked to the kitchen holding a lightbulb that was really only the socket.

She threw it in a trash bag and drank some water.

Fortunately, the water purification plant was running, so the water was still clear.

She brought her mouth directly to the tap and drank the water.

“That’s a huge help.”

She took a breath and relished the cold dampness in her fairly dry mouth.

She worked to refresh her mood.

…I’ll find the photo and sanxian eventually.

She told herself to think positively and her eyes stopped on the water flowing down from the tap.

“I haven’t done that in a while.”

She normally did some Tune Education with water every morning, but she had not done it even once since being hospitalized.

…So it’s been a week.

“If I don’t keep practicing, I’ll never be like mom and the others.”

She opened up the tap even more and the water forcefully struck the sink.

The refreshing sound of impact rang throughout the kitchen.

As she listened to it, Akira grabbed the spear Device from her waist.

She unfolded the collapsible spear with practiced motions.

After a single metallic sound, the spear was complete.

It was a little long to swing around in the kitchen and she held it under her arm.

"…"

She breathed in, closed her eyes, and…

"Oh, you Lives with an Octave of 160,000, you laughter of flowing water. Can you hear my Live?"

She made her Wind Up.

She called in the Lives with the usual method and sang her own Live.

Hers began with "la".

It had a white Word Color and a loud, gentle Tempo.

She created a Message with it.

The Message combined the spilling water with a flying bird.

"…!"

She completed it all in an instant.

The water falling from the tap became a colorless bird.

It was a dove.

Its Live was dense for its size, so it had little of the water's amorphousness.

It stepped up onto the edge of the sink and chirped.

"Good, good."

Akira smiled.

"Just like always."

She stroked the dove's head and walked toward the entrance.

She stopped after three steps and threw open the door.

Several doves would fly from there every morning.

Anything transformed with Tuning would go where it could regain its original form.

The doves created from water Lives would always fly toward the sea.

This one was no different.

"Now, it's time to leave."

She gestured out the door and the dove flew that way.

It flew from the sink and flapped its wings well despite them hitting the wall.

Its flapping wings sounded loudly as it took a midair turn toward the main entrance.

It flew right past Akira's eyes…and it burst.

"!"

The water scattered everywhere.

What had been a dove distorted and fell apart as if it had been hit by a rock.

She heard a sound just like pouring rain and water flew through the apartment hallway.

“Kyah!”

Akira’s legs and the hem of her skirt were wet.

The water was cold.

This was the blood of the dove she had created.

The dove was dead.

“…”

With the Device in one hand, she looked to her wet clothes and the wet hallway.

“What just happened?”

There was no need to ask; she already knew.

“I messed up…the Tuning?”

That was the only explanation, so she nodded.

“I can’t believe this. …I guess I’m a little rusty.”

She took a breath.

“I’ll take it a little more seriously this time. Yes.”

She shut the front door and held the Device tight in her hand.

Her eyes turned to the water pouring from the tap.

The water was the same as always.

It flowed the same as a week before and it contained the same Live.

…So why did I fail?"

Her expression was stiff as she asked herself that.

"I can't believe this…. What could it be?"

As soon as she said those words, she began Tuning once more.

Act 3: Bracket-Shaped Twin Vertical Lines (5:44)

Part 1

Rin experienced the somewhat tight-pulsed doze of just before waking.

She had entirely lost consciousness before, but now she was dreaming.

The dream filled the back of her mind in just an instant of her doze.

The images in one's brain felt no different from reality and this dream of hers felt especially realistic.

This dream was playing back her memories of the past.

This specific past was from the night the dragons had flown.

At one point during that night, she had been lying on the ground.

She had been collapsed in the courtyard of Hung Hom's thermal power station with Nein Engels flying in the night sky.

Unlike in reality, her past self was conscious in the dream.

"…?"

She opened her eyes and found her body collapsed near the center of the courtyard.

…Why am I here?

Her memory was gone, so she tried to recall it all in her dazed mind.

She remembered as far as the attack that had hit her from behind after breaking through the wall.

…I let my guard down.

She tried to prop herself up on her right arm, but all strength left it.

It was broken.

In an undeniably pathetic movement, she collapsed shoulder-first to the ground.

"…Ugh."

Strangely, there was no pain. Her body was tense and her sense of pain had numbed over.

…I can't believe this.

She gasped for breath while lying face-down and she focused on different parts of her body once more.

Perhaps due to her body armor, she had not been too badly injured. She only felt an ache in her ribs.

It seemed she could move her left arm.

Her left leg felt numb from the shin down, but it seemed she could move it too.

She could not move her right leg from the knee down.

She had not looked at it, but she still knew why.

She could feel something lying on top of her right thigh.

It was likely a pile of concrete.

Since she could not feel the lower leg, it had probably been crushed.

“Is it broken? …No, or did I lose it?”

As soon as she spoke, intense pain shot through the leg.

…!

It was the pain of the bone, flesh, and tendons snapping in the knee.

The pain crawled up her body while crisscrossing like a net.

The pain refused to even let her pass out.

“…Kh!”

She gathered strength in her left hand and clawed at the gravel.

And she got up.

“Phew.”

She breathed out and looked back.

What she saw was exactly what she had expected to find.

A piece of a nearly fifty centimeter thick wall of reinforced concrete was crushing her leg.

She chose not to look at it any longer.

An unpleasant sweat poured from her entire body.

A salty, visceral smell reached her nose.

…This isn't good.

Even she could tell she was on the verge of panic.

She was about to lose physical and mental stability.

She needed to gather her thoughts.

"Calm down," she said while trying to catch her breath

…The enemy.

"I need to defeat the enemy."

She chanted that line under her breath over and over.

Finally, her vision brightened and her eyes focused once more.

She gradually caught her breath and spoke those magic words again.

"Defeat the enemy."

As if to answer those words, she spotted a shotgun on the ground in front of her.

The collapsible stock was bent, but it looked otherwise unharmed.

"…"

She reflexively reached out for it, but it was too far away.

Her crushed leg restricted her movement.

Then pain raced through her again.

"…!"

But she did not stop reaching out.

Her left hand and left leg clawed at the gravel as if trying to crawl forward.

Suddenly, the concrete pinning her right leg moved.

She heard moving rubble and a much more unpleasant sound.

It was a bloody snapping sound.

"!?"

For an instant, her body was pierced by a sensation better described as scorching heat than pain.

She did not have it in her to think about what had just happened.

She still felt excess weight below her right knee, but the connection must have weakened because her range of movement had increased slightly.

She moved forward.

She reached out her hand and tried to grab the shotgun.

In that instant, a military boot cut into view and kicked the firearm away.

"…Eh?"

She blankly looked up and saw a man standing there.

"Fei!"

The Galgallin in mirrorshades looked down at her.

She reflexively reached for the handgun in her body armor's inner pocket.

"Don't bother. That will have no effect on me."

The deep voice stopped her.

Fei looked to the concrete crushing her leg.

"You will not last five minutes after losing that much blood. Would you like for me to finish you off? Answer me."

His emotionless tone of voice brought Rin fully to her senses.

She used just her left arm to lift her body.

"Do you not remember me?"

"I have no memories of you."

He opened his right wrist and a mortar stuck out.

Rin knew all too well how powerful the heat rounds it fired were.

"Are you serious?"

"…"

"Why? Why do this!?"

"To restore heaven."

He briefly glanced over at the shotgun he had kicked away and he said just one more thing.

"I will eliminate the enemy."

Rin's shoulders drooped when she heard that.

She gave a heavy sigh.

"I thought I could take care of the misunderstanding…if our paths ever crossed…"

And…

"Why?"

Fei did not reply.

He simply looked at Rin's face and she looked straight back up at him.

"There is nothing I wish to remember."

"!"

In the instant he aimed the mortar again, his large form was knocked to the side.

…*What!?*

A gunshot from behind seemed to answer her question.

The roaring of a motorcycle engine joined it.

"Boss!"

With that cry, Kouga charged into the courtyard on a motorcycle.

The roar of the engine sounded all the louder as it echoed off the buildings.

Out of the corner of her eye, Rin saw Fei slowly standing back up.

Kouga was driving in from straight ahead.

“Boss! Take my hand!”

He intended to snatch her up as he passed by.

She looked to Fei.

He was already standing and he was staring at the spear of light stabbed into his right arm.

That anti-demon round could slay a tiger, but it had done little damage to the Galgallin.

The spear had stabbed deep into the right arm of his custom body, but he had not shed a single drop of blood.

His expression gave no hint of injury either.

He looked ready to begin fighting immediately.

If she was to run, this would be the time.

…What should I do!?

Her hesitation was interrupted by Kouga’s shout.

“We can try this again later!”

She reacted by pulling the handgun from her body armor’s pocket.

The Colt New Service was a .45 caliber which focused more on impact than penetrative power.

When it fired an anti-demon round, it provided little rotation and the spear of light would fly in a completely straight line.

Rin aimed it at her own right leg and she fired.

She severed her right leg at the knee.

At the same time, Kouga scooped her up and continued on with a one-handed accelerating turn.

The motorcycle spun around while throwing gravel everywhere.

“Boss! Your leg!”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Saying that was the most she could manage.

She supported herself by clinging to the raised back of the backseat.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fei looking her way.

…*Fei.*

She did not speak her thought aloud.

He briefly seemed to sway and then he grew more distant.

The motorcycle had started away.

He did not pursue.

Instead, he pulled out the spear of light sticking into his right arm.

It was a casual action.

He then threw it toward Rin and Kouga as they fled.

“!”

It was an accurate throw.

The spear flew straight toward the motorcycle as it escaped on a curved trajectory.

Kouga had tilted his body in the direction they were headed, so he had not noticed the danger.

…I have to go to so much trouble for him.

She managed to think that in her hazy mind and she raised her New Service in one hand.

She fired.

The gunshot rang out and the recoil knocked her hand from the grip.

The spear of light she fired collided with the one Fei had thrown and cancelled it out.

A solid sound shook the air.

"!? What was that, boss!?"

Rin did not have the strength to answer.

The New Service was hanging from her finger by the trigger guard, so she picked it up and looked at it.

The ejector rod had bent.

It must have broken when she had been crushed by the wall, so she was surprised it had worked at all.

…And this isn't actually mine. Dad isn't gonna be happy.

With that carefree thought, she placed the New Service back in her pocket.

The motorcycle made it behind one of the buildings by taking a sharp turn around the corner.

She braced herself and clung to the back of the seat to make sure she was not flung off by centrifugal force.

This speed would normally have been nothing to her, but her body had grown far too weak.

…I can't believe this.

She closed her eyes and felt an intense urge to sleep.

However, that would be a dangerous slumber.

She knew that, but she still gave into the temptation.

It was not tension, pain, or even the fear of death that ruled her body.

It was nothing more than a heavy exhaustion.

And as soon as she closed her eyes and gave herself over to that peace, reality demanded that she wake.

"…Hm?"

Suddenly remembering when she had woken in the middle of the night before, Rin opened her eyes.

It was now daytime. Her vision was still not clear, but she could sense the light.

It took her an awfully long time to realize the white fog before her eyes was the color of the ceiling.

…This isn't good. I've been sleeping so long that my body's grown dull.

She smiled bitterly and heard a set of slippered footsteps rushing down the hallway.

…Is that a nurse? Do they know I woke up?

"Are you awake!?"

The young nurse who entered the hospital room could not hide the joy in her voice.

Rin nodded and tried to get up.

"Don't force yourself. You probably won't be able to move much yet. You slept for eight days, after all."

"Eight days?" Rin asked in a scratchy voice.

She remembered checking the calendar on the bottom of the clock face when she had woken during the night before.

"But didn't I go to sleep on…the seventeenth?"

She dug back through her memories and looked at the clock on the wall.

The display that had said June 17 now said June 24.

There were only six days until Hong Kong was returned to China on June 30.

On that night, an Earth Serpent would likely be activated and it would destroy the entirety of Hong Kong.

…*Oh, no!*

Shocked, Rin forced her body up.

Her back, stomach, and thigh muscles let out a scream and the nurse hurried over.

“Please don’t move! You’re seriously injured!”

Without listening to the nurse, Rin looked to the clock with strength filling her gaze.

She then spoke the same words she had thought just before having that dream.

“I’ll take action once this exhaustion leaves me, huh? Well, that certainly took a while.”

“Eh?”

She sighed without answering the nurse’s confusion.

And she had a certain thought.

…If I’m up against a Galgallin with a full custom body, I guess I have no choice but to fight fire with fire.

Part 2

Gunmal looked up in the seemingly never-ending expanse of Hong Kong's clear blue sky.

"In another six days, Hong Kong will be returned to China, hm? I wonder if Akira has calmed down some now that she's left the hospital," he said. "I kind of want to go to the beach before that final ceremony Rin mentioned."

He began to walk.

He was in Mong Kok, which had received relatively little damage during the Sixth Divine Punishment War despite being on the coast.

"Supposedly, most of the coastal factories were swallowed up."

He looked around his surroundings while continuing to walk.

Even if it had received relatively little damage, the scars of destruction were visible all over.

All of the barracks had been crushed as if by a giant foot.

Most of the houses and stores had lost their windows and even the seemingly unharmed buildings had cracks in the walls.

That was enough to prevent anyone from living there anymore.

"Hm," he muttered as he looked up into the sky.

A round VTOL aircraft slowly moved by far overhead.

Its external speakers were producing words in what sounded like Cantonese.

"An announcement from the government, hm?"

For the past few days, aircraft like that were more common sights in the skies than birds.

Investigation teams, rescue squads, volunteers, and some military from different counties had been visiting and leaving.

A shelter had been set up in the New Territories and a simple airport had been built there.

Some Chinese were leaving to live overseas and some non-Chinese were returning to their homelands.

The residents of Hong Kong were scattering throughout the world.

“The only people still here in central Hong Kong are the doctors, the patients, the eccentrics, and…”

He smiled bitterly.

“Saying ‘and us’ would sound awfully cool, wouldn’t it?”

He sounded fairly pleased with himself and he looked forward once more.

Akira’s apartment building was there.

A white crack ran through the concrete side wall like someone had made a diagonal sword strike.

He looked up at it and whistled.

He approached the side of the apartment with a light step and he quickly arrived at the bottom of the old black metal stairs.

He then slowly climbed a step at a time, while making sure not to make a noise.

"…"

Silence followed for a several seconds, but that was enough for him to reach the top of the stairs without incident.

His tall form stood on the second story corridor, but he had stopped.

His legs had been moving so casually before, but they had come to a quick stop.

Even his expression had stiffened at some point.

The only thing that had not changed was his silence.

His eyes looked straight ahead.

His gaze stabbed into the area of the corridor in front of Akira's room.

There was trash piled up there.

A tablecloth and glass shards were packed inside trash bags.

Wood pieces of a bed frame and a refrigerator were lying on their side, blocking the corridor.

"Did Akira move? No…I guess not."

He spoke but soon closed his mouth again.

His gaze moved slightly down.

The corridor floor was wet in front of her room.

The glass shards and scraps of cloth that had escaped the trash bags were flowing with the water spreading across the corridor.

"…?"

His eyes moved toward the source of the water.

"…"

He soon found it: the door to Akira's room.

Water was flowing from between the door and the floor.

He spent a few seconds staring at that spot.

The light reflecting off of the flowing glass shards grew duller.

They had sunk into the water.

That meant water was continuing to flow from the source.

"Is she training? No, her Live is too weak for that. …Then why?"

He shook his head.

His expression was still stiff and he sighed.

But…

"…"

He remained silent.

He simply watched the movement of what lay before his eyes.

After a few breaths, his legs began to move.

He did not step forward.

He turned around and away from Akira's room.

"Is she doubting?"

He took a breath and looked to the hand inside his glove.

That was his prosthetic right hand.

Still staring at it, he descended the stairs as silently as he had come.

For once, strength filled his gaze and eyebrows.

But…

"Interesting…"

Without ever looking away from his hand, his lips twisted slightly.

They formed a small smile.

Part 3

The high-rise structure that had once been the Archs RDC building was now entirely empty.

There was no sign of human life.

There was, however, sign of nonhuman life.

It could be seen in a corridor of the underground factory of Archs RDC's headquarters on the twenty-third basement.

Genius stood below the fluorescent lights with her shoulders leaning on the wall.

"…"

Her arms were crossed and a door was located next to her.

Unlike the soft material of the wall, the bulkhead door was made of exposed metal.

The solid door was about as thick as it was wide and something had been carved into the center of the door.

It was an emblem of two dragons playing together and forming a spiral. That was the Wild Emblem of the Maldrick family.

The emblem indicated that this was a Maldrick family workshop.

Genius was waiting for the man inside.

"J-Gun."

The corpse that now functioned much like a machine had spent three days holed up inside.

Creating a Device with Busting produced intense noise, but no sound escaped the bulkhead.

It was entirely sealed within.

…Although the neighbors often complained when he used that workshop in the city.

Only a few months before, she had been living with J-Gun.

It had been different at first.

"I was so afraid of going to the surface. I wouldn't have done it if Master Huang hadn't directly ordered me to."

She had only moved around at night.

Birds that flew the skies at night would fly off before dawn arrived.

And at some point, she had become a bird that returned to its cage when night fell.

The hierarchical relationship of client and hirer had vanished between the two of them.

The others in the neighborhood had realized she was there, but they had said nothing.

As if to show off what kind of person he was, their peaceful life had continued.

But that peace had been destroyed by a photograph she had found.

The old photograph had been of a woman who looked a lot like Genius.

“I felt like that had opened my eyes to what I was doing.”

She smiled bitterly.

“Why did I think something so silly?”

After she spoke to herself, she heard a slight noise.

“!?”

She looked to the bulkhead door.

…Is it opening?

But that hope was not fulfilled.

She heard the same noise again.

It came from the speaker in the corridor ceiling.

“Genius, I would like to hold our usual meeting. Is that okay?”

It was Fei’s machine voice.

His custom body was connected directly into the central management system and his mind was directly forming the voice.

Genius sighed, and…

“This is my post. Are you sure I should leave?”

“Double Lee says he still hears a Live ringing from within. The work is still ongoing.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “Hey, Fei?”

“…”

“Are you listening?”

“I am.”

She smiled bitterly.

“Can you tell me something?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What condition was used for the necromancy that resurrected J-Gun?”

“You should ask Double Lee.”

“I can’t. He won’t tell me.”

“You have yet to ask him, so it is too soon to conclude that.”

She crossed her arms and hung her head a little.

“Have you ever been afraid of something, Fei?”

“No.”

“Because you lost your memories of the past during your Psyche Outer surgery?”

“Yes. My thoughts are derived from my accumulated knowledge, not from emotion.”

“I…I’m afraid.”

“Of hearing Double Lee’s answer? That is what is leading to your hasty conclusion.”

“That sure is a coolheaded deduction.”

“I am merely rational.”

“Yes.”

I suppose being coolheaded is also a type of emotion, she thought while moving from the wall.

She then suppressed her emotions and spoke.

“Fei, I slept with J-Gun, just like Master Huang told me to.”

“It was necessary for the mission.”

“…Thanks.”

“There is no need to thank me.”

Genius gave a thin smile that did not reach her eyes.

“That may be why J-Gun used my light before.”

“Your light?”

“Cherubim can control light. …It’s probably a form of Busting, but he emitted it as his Live.”

“So you exchanged Lives in a Live Session?”

“Do you think Busters and Tuners gain each other’s abilities when they sleep together?”

“An exchange of Lives could create evolution or degeneration.”

“Doing it with me…may have brought degeneration.”

…If it wasn’t for that, he might not have died.

Her walking pace slowed as she thought.

“I wonder why,” she said.

“Why what?”

“If it meant exchanging our Lives, then when J-Gun slept with me…”

She took a breath.

“Wouldn’t he have read my Live…and thus read my thoughts and memories?”

“…”

Fei did not answer, so Genius continued.

“There are so many unknowns.”

“?”

“I never thought I would hear you say what you did to Double Lee.”

“What did I say?”

“You called him pitiable.”

She finally began walking again and his voice grew more distant.

“That was a statistical evaluation. It was not my personal decision.”

“Once you say it, there’s no difference. And…what is Double Lee thinking?”

“He is thinking about a contradiction between the Flight Song and Hong Kong.”

“A contradiction?”

Fei gave a simple answer.

“The Flight Song says Hong Kong connects heaven and earth, but in reality, Hong Kong still separates heaven and earth.”

“…”

“Normally, people sealed inside the earth would not create a song that approves of their enemy.”

“Does Double Lee have an answer to that?”

“He does have an answer, but he will not tell us what it is.”

“Do your statistical evaluations give you the answer?”

“I have an answer, but I do not understand it.”

“?”

“Double Lee thinks the Flight Song is a definite hope that was created at one point in history.”

“What does that mean?”

When Fei replied, his voice came from a different speaker in the corridor.

This one was directly over Genius’s head.

“It means it was something only one with knowledge of the future could create. To use a similar word…it was a prophecy.”

“A prophecy?”

“To be more accurate, it was a recording of future fact with one hundred percent accuracy.”

Hearing that, Genius stopped walking and frowned.

“I…can’t believe that.”

“But all of the instructions that President Huang left us in his report have matched what has happened.”

“What proof do you have that it’s a prophecy? Are you saying Master Huang knew how this would turn out for us?”

“That is the most consistent explanation.”

“I don’t like that way of thinking,” she said as she started walking again. “Besides, a prophecy?”

“The Lives of space and time are one of the three secret techniques of Tuning and Busting. One only needs read them.”

“But…I’ve never heard of a Tuner who could read time.”

“Double Lee said no Tuner that powerful currently exists in Hong Kong.”

“Currently?”

“During the Fifth Divine Punishment War, there was one other Nein Engel in Archs RDC besides President Huang.”

His words came from far behind her.

“That Nein Engel was Luna Azuel, Double Lee’s mother.”

Genius reached the end of the corridor as she listened.

She turned right and Fei’s voice came from both up ahead and behind.

“She began developing a Tune Emblem.”

“The one Double Lee uses, right?”

“Yes. And that knowledge was erased after the Fifth Divine Punishment War.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I am simply stating facts.”

“And you’re asking me to think about what they mean? You’re not just a puppet, you know?”

Fei did not reply and she said more as she walked.

“And unfortunately, I tend to view things pessimistically.”

“That is a very human way of thinking.”

She smiled a little at that.

“I think Double Lee is the same.”

The elevator hall came into view.

“What is this meeting about?”

“Double Lee believes J-Gun’s brother and his own sister are dangerous.”

“!?”

“This is only a prediction, but we need blood for the next ceremony, correct?”

“You mean he’ll use his sister’s blood?”

“I do not know, but a Seraph’s blood should make a sufficient replacement.”

“A pessimistic view, hm?”

…But it is true we don’t have any bottles of Master Huang’s blood left since J-Gun destroyed one.

“I wonder if Master Huang had predicted this part of the future as well.”

Fei did not respond to her musing.

That silence seemed to envelop her surroundings.

Interlude 2

Night reached all parts of the land equally.

How they dealt with that night was up to the individuals living on that land.

Some would reject it with lights and others would let it do as it pleased.

Akira did neither.

In her apartment’s kitchen, she neither rejected it nor let it do as it pleased; she ignored it as simple darkness.

The descending moonlight turned the north-facing window into a pale blue sheet.

Everything else was dark.

A single Live with a bright Tempo ran through the heavy Live of the darkness.

It was the Live of water.

The water poured from the tap and into the sink. Its Live tore refreshing and enjoyable gaps into the darkness.

As if responding to it, Akira's Live pulsated from where she was sat below the sink.

She sat there with her arms wrapped around her spear.

Even her wings and hair had sunk into the darkness.

Her Yard uniform had also lost its luster.

The ring of her Live was weak.

The Live emitted from her entire body had grown damp.

Its Word Color had sunk coldly and its Tempo was deep and muffled.

One's Live accurately represented their mental and physical state.

Akira was soaking wet.

Her hair, wings, and uniform were all so soaked that one would have thought she had run through the pouring rain.

The kitchen's floor was similarly wet.

The poorly-made wooden floor was absolutely covered in puddles.

The dark blue, chilly Live of the unmoving water drifted through the darkness.

Suddenly, a voice joined it all.

Akira had muttered something aloud.

"I can't believe this."

She had no idea how often she had said those same words this day.

“I…can’t Tune anymore.”

At the same time, a metallic sound rang out.

She was squeezing the spear in her hands.

“…”

A rough sigh fell to the floor.

“What should I do?”

And…

“Why?”

Some time passed.

For a long while, the sound of dripping water ruled the area.

Regardless, the moon slowly moved in the sky.

It was not visible from the window, but the faint light of its pale blue air did enter through the window.

The Live of moonlight filled that air a little.

That vague, clear, and pale Live illuminated her through the rectangular window.

The color of her skin, hair, and wings became hues of blue and white.

The water soaking her had not dried.

It was still falling as drops from the corners of her eyes and down her cheeks.

“Was it because of the one week blank? Now I can’t manage anything past an Octave of about 600,000.”

If one’s maximum Octave dropped, their power would drop accordingly.

“That’s half of my original power.”

Her gaze moved to the floor where the moonlight had yet to reach.

There, she saw the end result of the animals she had been creating for her Tune Education since the previous day.

Not even one of the water animals had been able to leave the apartment.

She sighed once and corrected her previous statement.

“This might be less than half of my original power.”

She hung her head, and…

“Why? It isn’t…”

She started to say more but stopped.

After a few seconds, she tried to close her slightly opened mouth but lightly shook her head.

She closed her eyes, frowned, and spoke the words as if placing them on her lips.

“It isn’t any fun.”

She touched her lips with her fingers.

She brought the hand back to her Device and held a thought in her heart.

…*Gunmal.*

“What has happened to me?”

That was all she said before sinking back into silence.

Despite her body growing chilled, she closed off her mind.

Sleep came quickly.

Act 4: Everyone's Beginning Occurs in the Five Elements (4:21)

Part 1

A clear morning sky covered Hong Kong.

It was such a deep blue that not even the white outlines of the clouds could blend into it.

Hong Kong's sky had not been this way before. This was a pure sky, unpolluted by shimmering heat or smoke.

A single Nein Engel looked up into that sky.

It was Akira.

She slowly walked through the nearly abandoned streets.

Her feet took her from Kowloon's administrative district to the Yard's base.

She had not been into work for nine days, but she had not told anyone she would be starting today.

"I can't believe this…"

She lowered her gaze, but her view was unobstructed because most of the buildings had been destroyed and shortened. She could see the previously hidden mountains at the center of the Kowloon Peninsula.

The green of vegetation did not cover the mountains.

Their dry earthen color contrasted with the blue sky above.

They had experienced landslides from the earthquake during the Sixth Divine Punishment War nine days before.

"…"

Akira remained silent and touched the collapsible Device hanging from her waist.

The metal blade felt cold.

"An Octave of 280,000, hm?"

That was the highest Octave she had managed to control that morning.

…I've gotten even worse than last night.

"Do I have a cold?"

Her carefree tone was belied by her expression.

Her face was stiff around the eyebrows.

When she noticed, she placed a finger between her eyebrows and sighed.

She shook her head lightly and moved her hand up to her forehead.

"Do I have a fever? I did go to sleep covered in water last night."

She sounded like she was trying to convince someone.

"This isn't good. If I do have a cold…"

She stopped walking and looked up into the sky with her hand still on her forehead.

“If I do have a cold…”

She repeated herself and moved her hand slightly to cover her eyes.

She then fell silent.

She stood in the empty street while covering her skyward gaze and not speaking a word. She did not say a thing as if waiting for time to pass before her eyes.

She took several breaths as silence filled her surroundings.

That silence was first broken by the quiet sound of someone clearing their throat.

Movement soon followed.

Her hand moved before her mouth. She lowered the hand covering her eyes.

However, those eyes were closed.

She was not looking at anything.

She still did not open her eyes, but she kept her head lowered and rather roughly turned around as if shaking something off of her.

“I’m so stupid.”

She took a breath.

“If I want the day off, I can use a vacation day.”

She began to walk once more, but in the opposite direction from before.

She continued talking to herself, but she only seemed to complaint about her workplace, such as improvements needed in the Yard's labor policies or the drop in quality at the Chinese restaurant. She complained the longest about the pay.

Each time she spoke, her pace picked up.

"I really am stupid."

She was more running than walking now, but she did not use her wings.

Her Tuning power had weakened, so she could no longer read the Lives of the wind and she could not fly. If she misread those Lives even slightly, she would move her wings wrong and lose all of her speed.

She ran through the empty streets like a normal human and the Device hanging from her waist made a sound each time she moved.

It was a metallic sound.

"…"

She stopped talking, but she did not stop her legs. She held the Device in her hand to keep it from making so much noise.

The metallic sound vanished.

This created a world of silence only broken by footsteps and breathing.

Her running feet leaped from the ground.

Her heavy breathing sounded loudly.

For a brief moment, she looked back.

As if to prove the silence of the city, she could only see the broken buildings and blue sky.

There was no one there.

Only then did she finally slow her pace. She slowly faced forward again and brought her racing feet down to a walk.

The only change from before was the hand holding her Device.

“I can’t believe this.”

She looked forward and saw her apartment building.

She had already arrived at the bottom of the old black metal stairs.

She took a few heavy breaths before saying more.

“This isn’t a cold, is it?”

She was speaking to herself.

A few seconds later, she nodded as if deciding on something.

With that as her signal, she slowly ascended the stairs one step at a time.

“…?”

She stopped halfway up.

“Someone’s…there?”

She sensed someone on the second story corridor.

She cleared her ears and saw a slight yellow Live.

…*Who is it?*

She moved her legs to climb the rest of the stairs.

Her eyes were directed straight forward and her gaze stabbed down the corridor and in front of her room.

She saw a single figure there.

“Gunmal?”

When the person turned toward her voice, it turned out to be someone else.

“Akira. …Yeah, sorry about this, but it’s only me.”

It was Kouga.

Just like always, he wore his blond hair in a pompadour and wore a Hawaiian shirt, but she did see some slight exhaustion on his face.

Akira asked this unexpected visitor a question.

“Wh-what is it? …A-and more importantly, you were okay?”

“Yeah, I was just fine. I don’t die even when you kill me, after all.”

“That’s true, but…”

“What are your plans for today, Akira?”

“Eh?”

“Are you heading to the Yard? You are wearing your uniform.”

She hesitated to answer that, but she soon did so with a smile.

“Yes. I figure there are a lot of jobs for a Tuner after what happened to Hong Kong. Everyone’s going to be in trouble if I don’t get back to work soon, right?”

Kouga answered her smile with a serious expression.

“The Yard was almost entirely wiped out.”

“…”

“There are a lot of jobs for you.”

“Eh?”

She tilted her head and he crossed his arms.

“It’s pretty bad. The injuries and destroyed houses are no joke. We need you to get started healing all the destruction that hasn’t settled into place yet.”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

“Eh?”

“I thought we were going to start fighting again so soon.”

“Of course not.” Kouga smiled bitterly. “Didn’t I tell you? The Yard was almost entirely wiped out. We couldn’t put up a fight even if we wanted to.”

“…I see.”

“During that thing everyone’s calling the Sixth Divine Punishment War, most of the Yard made an attack on Hong Kong Cave.”

“But the Nein Engels weren’t there. I know that much.”

“Most of them were caught on the way back to the base.”

“Eh?”

Kouga sounded disinterested as he answered.

“You can only get to Hong Kong Island through the undersea tunnel or by ferry, right? Well, an earthquake split that undersea tunnel apart.”

“…”

“Pretty much everyone but the unit that took the ferry was wiped out.”

“Wiped out?”

“It’s best not to think about it.”

“Wait! Wh-what about the General!?”

“He was one of the lucky survivors. …Huh? Hadn’t you heard? He was the one that arranged for your hospitalization.”

Come to think of it, I did hear that when I was released, she thought.

She was panicking a bit, so she sighed to help calm herself.

“Then what is the Yard doing now?”

“All police-related stations have been automatically locked down. We’re still on Stage 2 Alert.”

“Then you’re on the civil team?”

“Because I’m no use in a fight.”

“That’s not something to laugh about.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, whatever. …So where’s Rin?”

“Oh, about that. That’s why I’m here.” He looked up. “Can you heal her? It’s on the General’s orders.”

She answered with a question of her own.

“Can’t Rin…heal herself?”

“Eh?”

“What do you mean ‘eh’?”

“Oh, well, I just didn’t expect to hear you say that.”

“Wh-what do you mean? I was just asking. So has she not woken up yet?”

“She has. She did yesterday.”

“But she can’t heal herself?”

“It’s a pretty serious injury and the Live has settled in pretty bad, so you’ll have to find a slight disturbance to start with…”

“That’s not easy, you know?”

“That’s why we’re asking you.”

“…I suppose so.”

She nodded and felt her heart begin to race.

…This isn’t good.

In her Tune training that morning, she had only been able to control an Octave of about 280,000.

Rin could control up to 320,000.

If Rin could not do it, there was no way Akira could now. Not to mention that Akira’s power was vanishing as time passed.

“I wonder why.”

“Why what?”

“Oh, just talking to myself.”

…Why is it going down? If it’s because it isn’t fun…

“Maybe there isn’t enough tension.”

“For the boss? I seriously doubt that.”

“No, not that. I just can’t hold a conversation today…”

She started to say something more and nodded.

…You usually escape this kind of decline by getting desperate enough.

She was tasked with healing a serious injury.

She briefly recalled when she had seen J-Gun die.

"…"

…Am I losing my confidence? Then I just have to get it back, right?

That's pretty cheap reasoning, but it has to be right, she added.

"Okay. Then let's get to the hospital."

"Eh? Really?"

"What's that look for?"

"Well, you sounded like you didn't want to go."

"What good is a Tuner that can't Tune? You have your motorcycle, right?"

With that, she lightly tapped the Device at her waist.

It no longer made the metallic sound that had been hurting her ears before.

Part 2

The hospital was the same one Akira had been hospitalized at.

However, they went to a different building.

"Building 2's power supply is on the fritz, so she's in Building 3 despite her serious injury. You were in a special room in Building 1."

"Well, I am a Nein Engel. I can't use a normal bed. …Oh, using the main entrance would be the long way around, so let's head directly in over there."

Akira avoided the main entrance and walked to Building 3's courtyard-side entrance.

"It sounds like the boss has some kind of idea. I was hoping you could ask her what it is."

"Just between us girls, you mean?"

"Sorry."

Akira nodded and circled the entire hospital from the courtyard.

There was no one on the grassy courtyard.

The buildings surrounded the courtyard with Building 1 on the left, Building 2 straight ahead, and Building 3 to the right.

They were all giant white-walled buildings.

However, all of the windows in Building 2 were dark.

As Kouga had said, it seemed to have stopped functioning.

…The hospital's power supply is out?

Building 2 was used for seriously injured patients.

"…"

"What's that worried look for?"

"Oh, just feeling a little down."

"Yeah, I can't stand the smell of disinfectant either."

"Because you're a vampire?" asked Akira. "Oh, sorry," she quickly added.

However, Kouga only smiled bitterly without getting angry.

“Maybe that is why. Now that you mention it.”

“Come to think of it, I didn’t ask about your family.”

“My mother’s a vampire and my father’s human. It’s the same arrangement as your family.”

“No, not that. Have they left Hong Kong?”

“They went to London for a six-month trip,” he answered. “They’ll come back eventually. This is the only place where people like us can live and enjoy ourselves. I doubt my old man’s thinking of completely ditching this place.”

“I see.”

“I wish I could strike back at the enemy like you can. The civil team will probably be struck taking everyone left in Hong Kong to the New Territories.”

“That’s an important job, isn’t it?”

“The General said the same thing.”

“Well, he and I can be a lot alike.”

They arrived at Building 3’s entrance as they spoke. Akira hesitated a little, but she walked ahead of Kouga and pushed the glass door.

The door silently opened and she stepped inside. The smell of disinfectant grew stronger and she was surprised to find it was brighter than outside.

The brightness of the lights confused her and Kouga ran into her when she flinched back.

She began walking again.

“Which room is she in?”

“404. …Oh, I was told not to use the elevator.”

“That’s fine since I don’t like elevators, but I need to Tune heal her as quickly as I can.”

“You sound motivated now.”

“Yeah. I need to take this seriously, so I’m psyching myself up.”

With that, she turned toward the emergency staircase.

She climbed the stairs.

As they moved their feet, Kouga spoke to break the silence.

“Speaking of families, the boss’s came by. They apparently have some connections on the mainland.”

“Will Rin…be moving there?”

“In liberated Broad City – Shanghai, apparently. But that was the first time I learned her Wild Name.”

“She’s from the Feng family, right? And your family name is Yamashiro, isn’t it? I know everyone’s since I’m with Cleared.”

“The Feng family is famous. That must be why her family wants to get moving so soon.”

“Probably. …What do you think the General will do? Will he move to the mainland, too?”

“Who knows. No one knows much about his family.”

“He apparently has a wife. He’s always talking about her. Have you ever seen her?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe she’s imaginary.”

With that offhand comment, Akira came to a stop.

She took a breath and heard Kouga speak behind her.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking the fourth floor is so high up.”

As she climbed the stairs, she found herself out of breath and her pulse racing.

…Maybe because I always use my wings to fly.

She smiled bitterly and Kouga gave her a serious look.

“Are you still not feeling well?”

“Eh? Why do you ask?”

“Well…”

He pointed at the number on the landing. They were only on the second floor.

It was true this was too early to be exhausted.

“Maybe it was too early to ask you here…”

Kouga sounded worried and Akira frantically spoke up.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I was just kidding.”

Akira herself knew best of all that was a lie. Her breathing and pulse were far from “fine”.

…Kouga’s right…but what does it mean?

She started up the stairs again to hide her confusion. She forcefully stepped forward to continue the climb.

She consciously restrained her breathing. That quieted her breaths, but they were even more disturbed than before. And that disturbance sent her pulse racing even faster.

She started sweating.

It was a cold sweat.

This was not the warm sweat of exhaustion.

…What is going on?

The answer became clear once she reached the fourth floor.

“…”

She could no longer walk properly.

“Eh?”

She looked down and found her legs shaking on the fourth floor landing.

No, it was not just her legs that were trembling. Her arms and body were also shaking. It was a weak tremor, different from the tension of exertion.

…A chill? No, this is different.

She had seen the Lives of people trembling like this.

Their Live would have a cold purple Word Color and a Tempo like a racing metallic pulse that was too high-pitched to hear.

"Why am I afraid?"

She suddenly looked up.

"I get it now…"

She realized she had made a serious misunderstanding.

At the same time, she received the answer to all of her questions.

It was not her exhaustion or the lack of practice that was keeping her from Tuning.

…I'm afraid of Tuning.

Her body briefly recalled the ensemble of screaming Lives she had heard on the night of the flying dragons.

"!"

Her pulse grew stronger, the purple Word Color surrounding her turned black, and the Tempo briefly stopped.

Her chill grew worse and her arms moved on their own to hold her body.

Kouga passed by her without noticing how she was acting.

“404’s right in front of you.”

Rin’s hospital room was straight ahead from the landing.

“Right here. They weren’t allowing visitors until yesterday.”

She spoke without turning around and she did not respond.

Akira watched him reach for the doorknob and she removed the Device at her waist.

She then hid it from Kouga by placing it behind the railing of the next flight of stairs up.

Her pulse calmed a little.

She looked back just in time to see Kouga opening the hospital room door.

A chill of surprise raced through her body like an icicle had stabbed down her spine.

Once that door opened, she would have to Tune.

“Kouga!”

She just about shouted for him to stop, but the sunlight on the other side of the door stopped her.

The hospital room was bright.

It was pure white.

The bed was best described as sterile, but…

“It’s empty,” weakly muttered Kouga.

Akira also saw the empty space.

Rin had vanished from the hospital room.

“…”

She also found she had stopped trembling.

Part 3

The afternoon had arrived, but the blue sky still retained its color.

Below it, a tank was stopped in the center of the destroyed Nathan Road.

That Grant from the Yard belonged to the General.

The brightly decorated vehicle was not even idling as it sat there watching a young man facing away from it.

That young man, Gunmal, held Nein König in his flesh-and-blood left hand.

“The weather sure is nice today. You can see the sky perfectly.”

He gave a triumphant snort.

“If the coast wasn’t so badly damaged, I’d invite Akira to the beach. …Right?”

He looked back and a bit up.

The General sat on the Grant's turret.

The old man frowned and rested his head on his hand.

"In five days and a bit, Hong Kong will be returned to China. You need to worry about gettin' a visa before worryin' about the beach."

"I don't really care. If I have to choose between being treated like an illegal immigrant and the beach, I'll choose the beach."

"How 'bout you look around you before sayin' that?"

Gunmal did as he was told.

This part of Nathan Road was near where he and Akira had fought Fei and J-Gun. It had also been hit by the earthquake and tsunami caused by the destruction.

Most of the buildings were much shorter than before.

There was no one on the road, so his vision was clear.

Once he saw all that, he nodded.

"This place was destroyed pretty good, wasn't it?"

"That isn't all."

The General sighed.

In addition to the city's damage, the ground itself was torn up for about two hundred meters in front of Gunmal.

Shimmering heat rose from the damaged earth.

This destruction was new.

“Just because you run across a monster is no reason for goin’ that far.”

“Don’t blame me, old man. It’s my first day on the job.”

Gunmal showed off his armband. The green plastic armband said “Cleared” in white.

“The four Earth Burns really disturbed the ley lines around here, so without Akira…”

“Askin’ for your help might’ve been the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Stop flattering me.”

“Is that so?”

The General sounded annoyed and he looked down to his pocket.

Gunmal noticed the motion.

“Are you worried about the call from that guy?”

“More or less.”

“So Rin left the hospital and Akira’s emotionally unstable, hm?”

“The two of them are searchin’ around the city, but knowin’ Rin, they won’t find her.”

“You sound like you know where she is.”

“Of course. I know where all the young girls go.”

“Then where’s Rin, you dirty old man?”

“Well… Probably in somethin’ of a secret base of hers. Injured animals tend to go into hidin’ until they can make a comeback.”

Gunmal nodded at the old man's answer.

"She's going to heal herself between now and Hong Kong's return to China?" He looked to his own right hand. "Customizing her body would be the only way, but can she complete a surgery that major in time?"

"I don't know. From Hong Kong, she'd probably have to get a complete rearrangement of her Live in Shanghai or Detroit's virtual network. The question would be how well equipped her secret base is and whether it's still up and runnin'."

"Rewriting the data in the human genome, huh? At best, it would take three days hooked up to the network. Although she might be able to shorten that by routing through London to more easily convert her body's Live into text data."

"Either way, that isn't a surgery a normal woman should go through."

One of the tank's crew shouted from inside it.

"General! We have a reading to five o'clock!"

Based on the direction the tank was facing, five o'clock was south-southwest, or looking down Nathan Road toward the sea.

The General and Gunmal looked in that direction.

The eight lane road had four lanes in each direction and most of the buildings on either side had collapsed, but the walls where still quite large compared to a human.

Something even larger than those walls was moving.

A white mountain could be glimpsed behind one of the collapsed buildings.

“A white tiger, huh?” said Gunmal without really checking. “Comparing it to that building, it must be around twenty meters tall.”

The General’s eyebrows moved in response.

“A tiger? That’ll be the biggest one today.”

“I hate these Live disturbances that grow as they devour the city.”

“Is this any time to complain? Oh, that thing’s got an Octave of 1,600,000.”

“So it’s two buildings’ worth of disturbed Lives?”

Gunmal thought for a moment.

“Compare that to the amount of destruction on the overhead map. We’ll probably be done here once I defeat this one.”

“You make it sound easy. Hurry up and finish it off before it comes runnin’ this way.”

“Sure thing.”

Gunmal swung Nein König without looking that way.

“Ah.”

He placed that simple Live reverberation inside Nein König.

It was an impressive Live.

It had a low Tempo that moved like a wave and rumbled in one’s gut.

Its Word Color was the gray of metal.

He amplified it within Nein König and sent it racing out.

“!”

The quiet Live of his voice burst out as a roar too great to read.

The Word Color of the light made it look like a giant line of steel.

Its destination was a building looking down on the white form.

The metallic Live pierced through the building and destroyed it.

That was only the beginning.

The light burst from within the building that still had its first four floors.

A bestial cry shook the air from beyond the building, but Gunmal’s Live consumed even the beast’s roar.

It pierced through everything.

The rumbling sound resembled a giant piece of ice falling into the ocean.

The steel-colored light devoured both the building and the beast behind it.

However, it did not end there.

Three buildings of the same height were destroyed behind the tiger.

They were annihilated.

Not even their Lives remained.

There was only rubble and shimmering heat.

“That should do it.”

“Y’know…”

“I held back. Honest.”

Gunmal’s tone was light and the General looked away from him.

He looked to the earth torn up in a different direction.

“Bustin’ sure has gone a long way in Europe.”

“But Tuning hasn’t. And it looks like it hasn’t here either, maybe due to the Divine Punishment Wars. Most of the material about it has been lost, hasn’t it? Not as much as in my homeland, though.”

The General smiled bitterly.

“If more of it were left…I could’ve been a better teacher than I am.”

“Hm? For Rin and Akira, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“…”

“Gunmal. Didn’t you stop by Akira’s place?”

“Yes… But I might as well not have.”

“Why didn’t you actually meet her?”

“It didn’t seem like the right time. The ocean still hasn’t calmed down, after all. If I’m gonna ask her to the beach, we’ve at least gotta be able to swim.”

“Pervert.”

“You’re one to talk when you always bring up Akira in every conversation. Are you into younger women or something?”

“I’m not about to get turned on by a girl who could be my granddaughter. It’s just that my wife keeps insistin’ I look after Akira.”

“Your wife? Does she know Akira?”

“No.”

“Then what are you talking about, old man? Was there some glitch in your brain?”

“Don’t blame me. That’s just how women are.”

The General nodded and sighed.

The old man rubbed the scar on his cheek and looked back to the young man.

“It’s not time to meet her yet? …You’re soundin’ like a prophet.”

“A prophet? I’m not a Tuner.”

“True. There’re the Lives of Yin, Yang, and space-time above normal Bustin’ and Tunin’.”

“It sure would be convenient to draw out the Live of time and read the future.”

“It wouldn’t be that easy for Hong Kong at the moment.”

“Are all of the commands and books left by the emperor really gone?”

“All of that stuff was lost durin’ the Fifth Divine Punishment War.”

“The Fifth Divine Punishment War, huh?”

“A lot happened then.”

Gunmal nodded and looked up at the General.

“A lot, huh?”

His eyes turned to the scar on the General’s cheek.

He then stopped moving.

“I’ve been wondering.”

He fell silent.

“…”

His expression was unusually stiff.

He paused to breathe and then he spoke quietly.

“I’ve been wondering about something.”

“About what?”

“The official story is the original version of that giant Tune Emblem was made for local destruction.”

“Yes.”

“But what was it really made for?”

Gunmal’s eyes turned to the tank the General sat on.

He frowned and sighed.

“I guess that isn’t something to talk about in public.”

“I can tell you a little bit.”

“?”

“This has been repeated again and again and even this age has been overwritten countless times.”

“Is that supposed to be a hint?”

“You just have to worry about the present.”

“So I’m not supposed to worry about the past? There’s no way a young guy can do that.”

“It’s your loss. …A real shame after the last Hu went a little overboard and destroyed our old system. That produced a new system.”

Gunmal stuck out his tongue.

“System? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Some people fight because they don’t understand.”

Gunmal tilted his head and the General twisted his mouth into a slight smile.

He then peered inside the tank and gave the crew some instructions.

The tank started up immediately.

Its engine roared to life and it began to idle.

“Hey, at least tell me one thing!” shouted Gunmal.

“What is it?”

“If my previous prediction is correct, then you’re actually Akira’s father, aren’t you?”

“…?”

The General frowned for once and looked to Gunmal.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because of that scar on your cheek…and because you’re the only person in Hong Kong whose Live I can’t read.”

“And the rest is your prediction? Didn’t you see Akira’s family grave?”

“Oh, that’s right. …Come to think of it, she saw her father die. I guess I was wrong.”

Gunmal scratched his head.

“It was a good guess, though.”

With that comment and a bitter smile on his lips, the General turned around.

In that instant, someone descended onto the idling Grant’s secondary weapon, a 70mm machinegun.

The wind blew through.

Part 4

A four-winged female Cherub stood on the tank's gun with a refreshing wind surrounding her.

"It's been a while."

Genius looked to Gunmal.

She was not holding her light-summoning sword, so she had no intention of fighting.

Noting that, Gunmal lowered Nein König.

"Hey."

As he left his combat stance, the General called out to him.

"Who's this girl?"

"My brother's wife."

"I see."

The General looked to Genius and sighed.

"Young people these days don't know how to introduce themselves."

"Will 'nice to meet you' suffice, General of the Yard?"

Genius smiled bitterly and showed no hostility.

"Oh?" The General nodded. "So what do you want? Keep it short. It's well known that I don't like Nein Engels."

"I'd be careful if I were you," interjected Gunmal. "This old man seems to only like younger female Nein Engels."

"Shut up."

“I thought you wanted to keep this short?”

Gunmal and the General exchanged a glance at Genius’s unfazed tone of voice.

“See, old man? She’s scolding you.”

“That was your fault and you know it. …Now, then. What brought you here?”

“I have a warning.”

“A warning?”

Genius nodded and looked back to Gunmal.

“Leave this city immediately and never return.”

“What? Why would I-…?”

“You don’t have time, so listen to me. Either Double Lee or Fei are going to come kill you. …They saw you have enough power to perhaps destroy a dragon.”

“That’s definitely a problem… I have no intention of being killed by a guy.”

“I’m not joking.”

The General nodded toward her.

“This idiot ain’t jokin’ either.”

Genius looked to the old man and spoke while he gave her a harsh look.

“You should leave the city, too. You know that no one can stop the Earth Serpent that will be activated next, don’t you? Not even by Gunmal here.”

“Cause of the power of Yang?”

She nodded at the General’s question.

“Gunmal, you saw it, didn’t you? When you cut the dragon, it recovered and grew even stronger.”

“Yeah, I saw it. I tried to blow it away a second time, but I couldn’t.”

“That wasn’t made with the normal Tuning or Busting that you all use. Thanks to the power of Yang, it is obligated to rise to heaven.”

“It’s true I could cut it but not destroy it using my Busting.”

“You can’t win, can you? To oppose the power of Yang, you need the opposite power of Yin.”

“So it’s like the sun and moon?” asked the General.

Genius nodded.

“It is because the power of Yang is born from sunlight that the dragon belongs to heaven. …If you do want to destroy the dragon and return it to Hong Kong…”

“We have to hit it with a Yin dragon made from moonlight?”

“Yes. But is there a Tuner in Hong Kong that can do that?”

“There is.”

“Double Lee’s sister?”

Gunmal remained silent and Genius sighed quietly.

“It’s too bad. Even I can tell she doesn’t have as much talent as Double Lee.”

“Talent, huh?” Gunmal gave a thin smile. “Then we’ll have to agree to disagree. I’ve still got a lot I have to do here, so I won’t be leaving for a while.”

“You’ll die. Even J-Gun was killed.”

“I’m good at running away.”

With that, he raised Nein König. Genius stopped moving.

“What are you doing?”

“So either Akira’s brother or Rin’s lover is coming to kill me?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then what’s the other one going to be doing?”

“…” “Based on what you were saying, both of them could have come for me.”

Genius kept her silence, but…

“I can read your Live, Genius.”

“!”

“The power of Yang you were talking about came from Huang Daquan’s blood, didn’t it? Do you still have any of that left? Do you have the fresh blood needed for the final ceremony?”

“Well…”

“How about I answer for you? The other one is after Akira, aren’t they? They’re after her blood!”

As soon as he said that, a rumbling reached his ears.

“An explosion!?”

It was nearby.

It was only a few blocks north from this district.

Gunmal’s head shot up.

“They’ve already started!?”

“Yes, it’s best to get this kind of thing done quickly.”

A new voice reached him from the left.

“!?”

He saw wings on Nathan Road. It was a six-winged Seraph.

“Are you Double Lee!?”

“You must be Gunmal.”

Double Lee walked forward and Genius jumped backwards. She hopped from the gun barrel to the ground.

But Double Lee ignored her movement. He simply walked straight to the midpoint between the tank and Gunmal.

A slight wind blew through.

Gunmal and Double Lee were not even three meters apart.

Gunmal still held Nein König at the ready, but Double Lee was empty-handed with his sword Device at his waist.

Gunmal gave a light whistle at his opponent's attitude.

"You sure are confident. We've got a tank on our side, you know?"

"I am sure you would try to let the rest of your 'side' escape. I suggest we make this one-on-one."

"Hm. Then what if I try taking that woman hostage?"

"It was her decision to come here. She can take responsibility for her own actions. Also, that would not stop me. But…"

It was the General and not Gunmal who urged Double Lee on.

He did so while instructing the tank crew not to move.

"But what?"

"I have a question. …Why are you panicking?"

"…"

"Are you afraid of losing Akira?"

"What about you?"

"Would you believe me if I told you?"

“Yes. Based on your actions, I’d say you’re a lot like me.”

“You are overestimating me,” said Double Lee with a slight smile. “I am only doing what is necessary. It is all to find the answer.”

Gunmal’s expression changed at that point.

“I…can’t read your Live either.”

The usual smile had vanished from his face.

“Old man.”

“What is it?”

“You should leave.”

He did not tell him to run away.

“Honestly, it’s been a while since I’ve been moved to emotion like this.”

“Oh? Are you gonna stick with us to the end?”

“It’s not you I’m sticking with.”

“Then who?”

“Akira.”

That was all Gunmal had to say.

He raised Nein König in his left hand.

Act 5: Three Secrets of the Fifth Row (5:55)

Part 1

The azure sky was covered in Lives the color of dark clouds with a low, thick Tempo.

Those Lives of powerful intimidation were so thick they almost erased the sky itself.

The dark clouds slowly flew and wriggled around the sky like a mass of great serpents. And their intimidating gaze was pointed down toward the city of Hong Kong.

The serpents viewed only one thing: Gunmal as he stood in the center of a two lane road.

“Sister complexes are awful things. Did he find out I kissed her? …He’s definitely mad, that’s for sure.”

While complaining to himself, he ran toward the previous explosion.

As he hurried there, he intended to start by saving Akira.

“Not that I expect things to go that smoothly. I can run this easily after getting that first attack in, but…”

His voice trailed off and a harsh strength filled his expression instead.

“But it looks like he caught up just before I got there.”

He faced forward.

A mere five meters ahead, the intimidation in the air gathered together and descended.

The wind blew.

"!"

Gunmal put up his defenses as the sky's dark cloud Lives gathered in front of him. They gathered in the powerful rotation at the bottom of the vortex and they took a certain form.

It was fast.

All of the intimidation covering the sky instantly stabbed toward him.

The Lives gave a low roar.

A moment later, someone could be heard quietly landing.

"…"

Double Lee now stood in front of Gunmal.

He stared at Gunmal with all of the previous intimidation filling his gaze.

But Gunmal was not frightened or pushed back by that gaze.

"That was a pretty low-key appearance for the flashy lead up."

"To the average person, all I did was descend from the sky. But my will and gaze may have looked more impressive to someone who can see Lives."

"Then was all that for little old me?"

His tone said “you’re gonna make me cry”, but he suddenly swung Nein König in his left hand.

“Ah.”

He Busted the air with that steel-colored Live.

The air exploded with a heavy metallic sound.

And it did not stop at a single explosion. Just as he had done in front of the General, a chain of explosions covered a wide range. He Busted the Lives of the air, transformed it into thousands of pure white ion spheres, and swung Nein König over a wide path.

And he charged in amongst it all.

He had stopped breathing and he thrust Nein König forward while running in the same direction.

Nein König’s tip created a path by piercing through an explosion that was becoming a mass of light. That explosion had been created by Busting the air, so he Busted it again to disperse it.

Gunmal crouched low as he ran through the tunnel dug by Nein König.

The end of his hair, the bottom of his coat, and his shoes were torn into by the exploding air.

But he did not care.

A few seconds later, Nein König’s tip contacted normal un-Busted air.

He immediately broke free of the forest of exploding light.

He took a quick breath and continued running.

Behind him, the explosions grew accustomed to the surrounding air and showed signs of diffusing.

“He’d have to be a real monster to escape that unharmed.”

Gunmal did not even bother turning around, but…

“I can’t believe this.”

He tilted his head as he ran.

“Looks like he really is a monster.”

He smiled bitterly and looked back to see a large bird.

The bird of prey had a wing span of at least ten meters and it was filled with pure white light.

It was a beast created from Tuning.

And Gunmal realized what Live its pure white body had been created from.

“My own Busting!?”

He took a large leap forward.

The great bird’s beak tore into the spot he had just vacated and he heard the asphalt being torn apart.

While listening to the events behind him, he flipped Nein König back over his shoulder and continued running.

“This is no laughing matter. …Um, I think I used an Octave of just over two million for that attack, so to erase it again, I’ll need… Hey, give me time to think!”

Another attack arrived.

Gunmal jumped right to escape. A beak the size of his body descended within arm’s reach to the left.

And it mercilessly stabbed into the road.

A great roar sounded and Gunmal took action.

He was resting Nein König over his left shoulder, so he slammed it horizontally toward the bird.

He did not emit a Live.

Nein König struck the base of the beak and produced a solid sound.

“!”

Gunmal Busted that sound.

He directly Busted the action of “striking”.

Nein König amplified the “striking” Live inside itself and instantly released a Live powerful enough to swallow up the great bird.

The great bird was enveloped by the Live reverberating from Nein König.

It reverberated with the sound of being struck.

With a solid sound, the great bird voicelessly came apart.

It exploded.

Light and a bursting sound spread and multiplied.

Gunmal reversed Nein König’s swing and negated the explosion of light.

Then, he sighed. He faced forward to find the road open and becoming an arcade. Some dull gray smoke hung in the air. His destination was close by.

He began running once more.

“It’s pretty impressive you can keep up with my Busting using an Over Up.”

“Staying true to the fundamentals is my style.”

Double Lee’s voice rang out and Gunmal sent his gaze around the area as he ran.

He looked to the sky, the destroyed buildings, the road, behind him, and straight ahead once more.

After looking at all that, he smiled bitterly.

“How about you quit hiding and show yourself? You cheapskate.”

“I cannot afford to be hit by an attack like that last one.”

“Did it get you?”

“A bit.”

“Hell yeah. I’ve still got a chance.”

“Yes, but your brother did not even manage to scratch me.”

“That’s because he was gay. He would always hesitate when it was a good-looking guy.”

“…”

“I’m just kidding.”

Gunmal received a response after a beat.

“I was beginning to wonder if you could not see Genius.”

“Oh, I saw that. I saw the other person’s Live inside her,” he said lightly. “And that means I’m old enough to be called uncle. This is truly a sad day.”

“Only if you survive this.”

“Oh, how scary. You certainly are a confident genius.”

“A genius, hm? I suppose you were called that as well.”

“It’s not a bad thing to have people calling you, right?”

Gunmal slowed his pace a little.

He passed between two buildings and entered a larger street.

It was destroyed as well.

There were three lanes on either side and it was piled with wreckage from collapsed buildings. The wreckage formed a several dozen meter concrete mountain with the wide base of a stratovolcano.

Gunmal came to a stop and looked to the peak of the mountain before his eyes.

Something that stood out against the color of the concrete had fallen there.

The color was a nearly-gold white.

They were wings.

They were Akira's wings.

She lay at the peak of the mountain.

Gunmal smiled bitterly.

"I see. That's some nice bait. …Do you love me that much?"

"You do often hear people say they love someone enough to kill them."

"I can't believe this… I don't protect guys, you know?"

"Neither do I."

"Then is it because you hate me?"

"Yes."

“And is that because I laid a hand on Akira, you great genius who stays true to the fundamentals?”

Double Lee responded with a bitter smile of his own.

“That sarcasm… You understand everything, don’t you?”

“Didn’t Genius tell you? My brother’s Busting was always true to the fundamentals. To me, it seemed unbelievably stiff.”

“Did your brother look up to you?”

Gunmal laughed quietly at that question.

“Personally, I think staying true to the fundamentals is one form of style.”

With that, he walked forward. He slowly began to climb the mountain of rubble to reach Akira.

Meanwhile, he raised Nein König in his left hand.

“How about we bring this farce to an end? I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I can’t be dying anytime soon.”

His casual tone was belied by the intense attack he launched as he swung the down the Device.

Part 2

A great rumbling tore apart the asphalt.

The General’s beloved modified Grant raced toward the Yard HQ at full speed.

Each time it drove over a head-sized piece of rubble, the thirty ton tank would shake.

That shaking affected the top canopy the most, so the General's body shook about as he leaned out.

"Has my Tunin' gotten weak? How'd I let a big-shot like that get so close?"

He held his arms sharply forward to fight the shaking and looked back in the direction Gunmal had gone.

For once, his expression was tense.

"Honestly… Gunmal's gettin' pretty close to some interestin' parts of Hong Kong's past. Kids these days need to quit scarin' their elders so much."

He sighed, peered inside the tank, and asked a question.

"Hey, are we still not in relay range for the radio?"

He nodded when a crewmember told him they would be in range after moving another three hundred meters north.

"Once we're in range, transmit a message to all of Hong Kong, tellin' everyone who can to gather at the Yard. I'll take responsibility for whatever happens."

He then leaned out into the wind once more.

And he gathered his thoughts on his own.

“Since Akira’s brother’s on the move, then the final ceremony must be close, just like that young lady and Rin said. They must be gettin’ desperate.”

As soon as he nodded to himself, he heard an explosion from behind.

“!”

The ground shook a bit and the Grant trembled.

“Now that’s a frightenin’ Live. …Is it Gunmal?”

He moved just his gaze back and spotted smoke rising into the sky.

He clicked his tongue and faced forward again.

In that instant, someone ran out in front of the Grant.

“…!? Full stop!”

He shouted far louder than one would expect of such a small body and the Grant immediately reacted.

The sharp silhouette of the tank pitched forward.

The treads coated in resin using the European method blew blue smoke backwards and peeled away.

After a long sound like piles of cloth being torn, a metallic sound finished it all off.

After that, the wheels screeched and the Grant stopped.

To make sure he was not thrown out, the General had lowered his upper body onto the upper surface of the tank.

"…Wait."

The word that escaped his lips was directed at the figure frozen in place only two meters in front of the Grant.

The female figure had two sharply-angled wings on her back.

It was Akira.

"Impossible." The General gasped. "Weren't you fightin' in that battle back there!?"

He got up as he spoke and Akira blinked in confusion.

"F-fighting? Me?"

"Yeah, that's what they said…"

"What? Didn't Kouga contact you? I've been searching for Rin this entire time. But I thought things were getting dangerous when I saw that explosion, so I was on my way to somewhere safe."

"Explosion?"

"Yeah. You saw that smoke, right? Over there… I wonder what it was. Maybe some remaining fuel caught fire like they mentioned in the newspaper."

"That was no explosion! It's a battle between a Buster and Tuner."

"It couldn't be." Akira frowned. "If that was Tuning and Busting, there would be Lives with powerful Messages…"

She slowly trailed off and her expression changed entirely. It was the look of someone who had stepped on something they should not have.

When she hid her mouth to hide it, the General spoke up.

“Get goin’.”

“…Wh-what about you?”

“I’ve got my own job to do.”

“D-don’t say that! That’s irresponsible!”

“Yeah, and this problem is your responsibility.”

“H-has something bad happened?”

“If you want to know, then get goin’!”

His shout sent a tremor through her body.

She opened her lips as if to say something back.

“…”

But only silence came out.

Instead, she nodded once and moved her legs.

She passed by the General’s Grant and began to run.

She continued forward while hanging her head.

Part 3

The swing of Nein König used a steel-colored Live to strike Akira as she lay at the peak of the rubble mountain.

When the solid sound struck her, she broke apart into Lives for some reason.

The blue, refreshing wind Lives that gently floated up were not the Lives of a person.

Gunmal watched them go and muttered “It really was a doll”. He then looked around, ignoring the peak of the rubble mountain, and looked to a building rooftop on the left.

“Hey, could you quit hiding?”

“I suppose there is no point in hiding now.”

With those words, a figure appeared standing on the edge of the rooftop pierced by Gunmal’s gaze. The six-winged Nein Engel was Double Lee.

The right shoulder of his pure white combat coat was torn.

The white material was dyed red from the shoulder to the chest and it was definitely his own blood.

“Red looks pretty good on you. …But this isn’t the time. Why? Why isn’t Akira here?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you or not.”

“I’ll make you tell me one way or another. A Tuner can instantly heal the wounds after all.”

Double Lee smiled bitterly at those hostile words.

“I see. So I was right.”

“Hm? About what?”

“I wanted to know what you thought about my sister…about Akira.”

“So are you done with your little test? If so, I’d like to know how I did.”

Gunmal sounded carefree and Double Lee smiled back.

Then he slowly raised his right arm that had been limply hanging down.

The hand held a sword that emitted a transparent light.

It was a Device. It was a commercial model, but it was obvious at a glance that the precise mold gave it great accuracy.

But Gunmal was faster.

“Is that your answer!?”

He swung up Nein König.

He was not preparing for an attack. He made a diagonal strike from below.

“Ah.”

He amplified his own Live as he ran.

With a metallic tempo that rang into the distance and a steel Word Color, the Live formed a silver pillar of light.

The pillar was fifteen meters across and it swallowed up Double Lee with no chance to escape.

Or it should have.

Gunmal's Live burst in front of Double Lee.

The pillar of light scattered in every direction and then gathered back together.

It had been Tuned.

Double Lee had given Gunmal's Live a new form.

It became a Lesser Dragon.

The Lesser Dragon made of silver light was twenty meters tall and it even had scales, claws, and fangs.

"Not bad."

Gunmal muttered lightly as he ran. He ran to the top of the rubble where the doll of Akira had been.

"At that height, I'll be on the same level as him."

The Lesser Dragon pursued him as he ran up the rubble.

Man and dragon moved at different speeds, so the giant fangs approached behind Gunmal in an instant. But…

"Ah."

He fired a shot while looking back.

A great rumble rang out.

A moment later, the Lesser Dragon was blown away like a mere toy.

It gave a screaming roar.

And that was all.

Its twenty meter form collapsed at the base of the rubble and exploded.

Concrete shrapnel flew into the air, fell back down, and struck both the ground and rubble mountain.

But Gunmal paid it no heed.

“I hate being hit by my own Live. It makes me shudder.”

Meanwhile, he reached the peak and looked to the roof of the building to the left.

Double Lee stood there.

Blue, refreshing Lives flew around him.

They were Lives of the wind. Based on the sheer quantity, they probably had an Octave of about one million.

He swung his Device as if to slice through those Lives.

He looked to Gunmal and gave a shout.

“Word Accel! Oh, you Lives with an Octave of 1,300,000!”

It only took an instant for the wind to become a long, thick spear.

“!”

The spear flew toward Gunmal.

Unlike the Lesser Dragon, this attack moved directly toward him.

“You don’t make this easy!”

With that shout, Gunmal swung up Nein König.

And he voiced his own Live.

“Ahhhhhh!”

The Live was sharper and had a higher Tempo than before.

Nein König amplified the Live and produced a much brighter Word Color light than before.

Without even checking on that, he swung Nein König back down.

The bladeless sword-shaped Device sliced through the wind.

The released Live was narrower but several times brighter than before.

It was a powerful strike.

It pierced through the center of Double Lee’s wind spear.

With a great bursting sound, the wind scattered in every direction.

But Gunmal’s Live did not stop.

Beyond the destroyed and vanishing spear, it flew straight toward Double Lee.

Meanwhile, Double Lee thrust his Device forward to endure it.

“Don’t think you can defend with that!”

Gunmal stared at the man while raising Nein König once more.

In that instant, a slight smile covered Double Lee's lips just as he prepared to receive Gunmal's Live with his Device.

"!?"

Just as doubt filled Gunmal, Double Lee gave a shout.

"Fei!"

Gunmal followed Double Lee's gaze.

He turned behind him and found someone else standing on the opposite building.

The name Double Lee had shouted belonged to a Galgallin man who had customized his entire body.

A mortar was already extending from his arm.

Gunmal saw the pure white Live of great heat building down the barrel.

Meanwhile, Gunmal had yet to prepare Nein König for his next attack.

"Just when I was wondering if you had gone after Akira!"

His shout was drowned out by the mortar's blast.

At the same time, Gunmal's Live struck Double Lee.

"!"

The two intense sounds joined together to fill Hong Kong with a single great roar.

Part 4

Akira ran between two nearly collapsed buildings.

Her wings felt heavy on her back, but she still felt no desire to fly.

…Why does it have to be now that I can't read the wind properly?

"Now I'm just a human with wings."

She gathered strength in her legs.

The great sounds of battle had continued for more than thirty seconds now.

The last roar had brought an intense wind with it, and silence had followed.

The battle was over.

Akira silently mouthed a man's name.

She repeated the name a second and third time and nodded.

"It's okay."

She faced forward.

The alley came to an end and a road opened up. The sun shined down there, so it was a little bright.

She charged out into that light.

"!"

She found a street covered in rubble.

But these were not ruins.

She found scorched earth.

A few buildings and the ground had been melted and vaporized by heat, leaving nothing behind.

Akira recognized the scene.

That destruction had been turned her way before.

“That’s the mortar of that Galgallin named Fei.”

Her running feet came to a quick stop.

She could feel the heat through the soles of her shoes.

A closer look showed bluish-white smoke and shimmering heat rising all over the place.

“It’s so hot…”

With that obvious observation, she looked around again.

The scorching blast had cut across the road in an elliptical shape.

The ellipse had been fifty meters across at the widest and twenty meters at the narrowest. The ellipse’s curve grew larger to the left because it had been fired a bit downwards from above on the right.

A pile of concrete had been blown away in the center of the road.

The heat had been so great that the concrete’s surface had turned to white ash, everything had bent, and some things had fused together.

They all gave off intense shimmering heat to make their presence known.

"…"

Akira remained silent.

But not because she was so focused on the shimmering heat coming from the concrete.

Her eyes were turned toward the top of the pile.

A single Device was stabbed into the concrete pillar there.

It was Nein König.

That blade-less Device had suited Gunmal perfectly.

Amid the rippling shimmers, its color remained unchanged, but its hilt was missing.

Its owner was nowhere to be seen.

"You're kidding…"

Akira took a step back.

She looked around but found no one.

"Gunmal…"

No one answered her.

She looked up into the sky.

"Is my brother not here either!?"

The surrounding scenery gave her a clear response: silence.

Akira fell to her knees.

The heated asphalt surrounded her with shimmering heat.

“Gunmal…”

She called that man’s name.

“Gunmal! Aren’t you supposed to show up when I call your name!? Gunmal!”

As soon as she gave that shout, she heard what sounded like rock being struck.

It was the sound of a Live being destroyed.

She looked up in surprise and saw a man in the sky.

“…!?”

Before she could ask anything, the man fell down to her feet.

She heard a dull sound and a wet sound.

“Blood!?”

The dark red substance spreading on the road produced white smoke as it contacted the heated surface.

She ran over to him.

“Gunmal!?”

She called the Urban Name used by Busters and Tuners and she lifted him in her arms.

She realized his coat had burned away from his right shoulder on down and his prosthetic hand was exposed.

The hand's fingers had been crushed and slightly fused.

She gasped.

"You idiot! Why…why are you about to die!?"

He did not answer her question.

He only breathed weakly yet deeply with half his face dyed from the blood flowing down his forehead.

She looked around.

There was no one there, but she still shouted out.

"Is anyone there!?"

Her voice lost to the heat and did not travel far.

The surrounding heat enveloped them and stagnated. They were surrounded by silence and the presence of time seemed to vanish entirely.

It was a still place.

"…"

Akira felt sweat on her skin.

She lifted her head a little.

She opened her mouth and tears spilled from her eyes, perhaps due to the heat.

"…!"

Her first cry did not even produce a voice. Nor did it form a Live.

She held Gunmal in her arms.

Finally, she managed to produce just one word.

"Someone…!"

And…

"I can't! I can't do it myself!"

The only one listening was Nein König which had broken in two.

It took quite a long time for the surrounding heat to cool.

Interlude 3

The hospital lobby Akira had passed through the day before last had sunken into a darkness that did not quite fit the term "late night".

During the day, it was a bright place meant for victims to communicate with each other, but at night, it was only a space of empty darkness.

The emergency lights were dim and only illuminated what lay directly below them.

Two men could be seen below one of those weak light sources.

One was the General who stood directly below the light.

The other was Gunmal who sat on the lobby bench below the light.

He wore his one-armed coat directly over his bandaged skin.

Exhaustion colored his face…no, his entire body.

His lips moved.

“What’s Akira up to, old man?”

“C’mon, is that really what you’re gonna ask after callin’ me here? What about your own body? Like that prosthetic hand.”

“I’m fine. And I can always get a new hand. …So how’s Akira?”

“She’s sleepin’ at my house.”

“Oh, you’ve finally crossed that line, have you?”

The General frowned.

“That’s not what I meant. My wife’s looking after her right now. She dragged someone as big as you out from all that heat. Also…”

“Also?”

“She went back in to retrieve your burned-up Device.”

“What was she thinking?”

“Don’t ask me,” simply replied the General. “But the exhaustion and dehydration’s done her in for the time being. I thought I’d let her rest at her own place, but…”

“Yeah, her place is a mess and full of water.”

“You knew about that? You knew, and yet…”

“Don’t get so upset, old man.” Gunmal sighed. “Akira wasn’t the on that healed me, was she? I doubt she can Tune right now.”

“She’s clingin’ to your Device and refuses to let go. My wife wanted to heal her, but she was complainin’ that Akira won’t let her remove her clothes.”

Gunmal smiled bitterly at the General’s joking tone of voice.

“You know why Akira can’t Tune, don’t you?”

“Why would that be?”

“The same reason you taught Rin how to Tune but didn’t teach Akira.”

“That’s because Akira could already do it.”

“If you keep lying in your old age, you’re going to be a lonely old man.”

“…”

“I caught a glimpse of Rin’s Live.”

“Rin’s was an accident,” muttered the General. “If it wasn’t for that, she wouldn’t even be in Hong Kong. She’d be somewhere else entirely livin’ with that young man named Fei.”

“Sounds tricky.”

“I got a phone call at home. Rin’s visited a Custom Body shop in the New Territories and she’s connected to Detroit to customize her body. And without tellin’ her parents.” The General smiled bitterly. “It never seems to work out right. Where did we fail to make the change?”

“Really? I feel like I’m always at my best no matter how hard I work.”

“?”

“You realized long ago that nothing you can do can change the past itself, right?”

“Yeah. You can remake the past, but you just end up pilin’ up the means to do that and never move forward.”

“Who in Hong Kong was the first one to realize that fact?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“To feel satisfied.”

Gunmal’s answer was an incredibly normal thing, so the General smiled bitterly again.

“The ones who realized that fact of yours were me, my wife…and Huang Daquan.”

“…”

“But we realized it too late. So the pasts that we and the others piled up had to be settled by Hu and Luna.”

“Settled?”

“After several Divine Punishment Wars and the creation of Hong Kong Cave, the Nein Engels and humans parted ways in this city, but there’s still one thing here that thinks of it all in a positive light.”

Gunmal fell silent for a few seconds.

“You mean the song?”

It had taken quite a long time in the night for him to say those few words.

A moment later, Gunmal moved a little.

He had nodded.

Then he stood up.

The General looked up at him and narrowed his eyes.

“I can see your Live.”

“There’s no point in searching for another reason to hide it.”

He smiled bitterly.

“I’ll use the remaining five days to create a Device.”

With those simple words, he clenched his left fist.

That flesh-and-blood hand filled with tremendous strength.

Act 6: Consciousness on June 30 (3:01)

Part 1

The evening of June 29 arrived awfully slowly.

Part 2

When Akira awoke, she was surrounded by darkness.

…Is it nighttime?

She quickly realized it was not.

The faint light of a cloudy day slipped in through the gap at the center of the thick curtains.

That light fell on her face as she lay below a single sheet. The bed was located in the corner of a wood-floored room.

She noticed her clothes neatly folded by the pillow.

…Where am I?

Her sense of smell answered her question. A slight scent of lubricating oil filled the room.

That was the General's scent.

…Is this his house? He never tells anyone about his family, so did he really bring me here?

She had only just woken, so that question rolled around her blank mind while she heard distant cicada cries.

…Am I dreaming? His house would be in the middle of the city, so why would I hear cicadas?

That was when it hit her.

…There is no city anymore.

Hong Kong was no longer filled with rising smoke, sounds of movement, or human figures.

After confirming that fact, her mind gradually grew more alert.

And she realized something else too.

…I can't hear any Lives.

"!"

She could not hear the city's Lives that she always heard when she woke up.

She could only hear the cicada cries.

A large tremor ran through her body.

She started sweating.

She felt blood rushing to her head and her mind grew entirely clear.

She tried to get up from the bed.

"Ah."

She slid right back down.

She had been lying on her right side, so her right arm was numb.

She grabbed her numb arm with her left hand, crossed her arms, and stopped moving.

…How long was I asleep? My body won't loosen up.

She silently asked her body, but she heard no Lives in response.

She only sensed something vague and elusive like with Gunmal.

But this time, it was with herself.

Just like a normal person who could neither Tune nor Bust, she could only hear the sounds reverberating in her ears and body and she could only see what reflected in her eyes.

That was not nearly enough.

She could not see the sounds dancing in the air and she could not hear the light or the shadow.

Her anxious pulse pounded loud in her ears and the shadows enveloping the room felt far too powerful.

The daily calendar on the wall said it was the twenty-ninth.

From somewhere else in the house, she heard a pendulum clock ringing at the top of the hour.

The bell rang four times, so it had to be 4:00 PM.

Hong Kong would be utterly destroyed the night after this.

"…"

Without saying a word, she sank into the bed. She used her will more than her strength to hold herself with her unmoving arms.

And she sensed something in those tense arms.

She held something hard in her right hand and her arms were wrapped around it.

She looked down.

It took a beat before her eyes focused.

But then she saw it.

She held something like a metal panel in her arms.

The metal panel had been molded into something like a musical instrument.

It was a Device.

She recognized it.

"Nein König."

She tried to speak the name of the man associated with that Device.

"…"

But she could not.

The broken Device had no hilt and it showed no reaction to her emotions.

…Not that it would react to the Live of a Tuner who's losing her powers.

She gathered strength in her brow and tore her gaze from Nein König.

Her eyes then turned to a certain point in the shadowy room: the wall.

A wooden vase hung from the white earthen wall.

A jinyinhua vine grew there with several yellow trumpet-shaped flowers.

Jinyinhua was a vine plant, so it needed to wrap around something to grow.

It was wrapped around a long, angular, and golden feather.

She recognized the color.

…Is that my feather?

But then…

"Have you woken up?"

The General's voice reached her from beyond the room's sliding door.

She looked that way but did not move her body.

She felt a little wary and remained silent. She pretended to still be asleep.

"…"

But despite her silence, she heard a sound from beyond the door.

She could imagine what it was, but first…

"My wife escaped outside this morning. But…here's some simple boiled water and rice porridge."

His voice was muffled by the door, but it still reached Akira.

She shrunk down in shock and closed her eyes.

…I'm being a nuisance again…

The General did not answer her thought.

After a while, she heard his slow, quiet footsteps walking down the wood-floored hall.

She had not heard those footsteps when he had approached.

"I can't believe this…"

She gathered her will and embraced Nein König again.

She briefly recalled an unpleasant Live: the ensemble of countless screams as the Earth Burn had flown through the sky.

"…"

She tried to ignore it by closing her heart and sinking deeper into the bed.

She wanted to fall asleep so she could accept the facts that had stabbed into her over the past few minutes.

Part 3

"It's going to rain soon," said Double Lee as sat in his chair.

He was in a room on the fifteenth basement of the former Archs RDC building. He was using it as a simple residence, but it contained nothing that would let him see outside.

He had determined that by listening to the Lives of Hong Kong.

“Typhoons are proof that nature can take some pretty drastic measures. Don’t you think, Genius?”

He rotated his chair toward the room’s entrance.

The automatic door was the same flat white as the wall and Genius stood in front of it.

“…”

She remained silent.

“Is something the matter?”

Double Lee tilted his head and smiled thinly.

“You were the one that came to my room, so we can’t start speaking until you ask me something.”

“I’m sure you already know what I want to ask,” replied Genius.

Double Lee closed his eyes with the smile still plastered to his lips.

Then the smile moved to produce words.

“I want to hear it in words, Genius. I am not your translator.”

“…Why?”

“That’s what I want to know. If you aren’t even willing to say it out loud, why do I need to say anything? So why are you asking me with a Message carried by your Live?”

Genius’s shoulders drooped.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I always am.”

“I know.”

“Then go ahead.”

“…”

“?”

“Aren’t you going to accuse me?”

“Of what?”

“Of showing off. I told J-Gun’s brother and the Yard’s General about the final ceremony.”

“I do not mind. It’s not like they can stop the ceremony.”

Genius frowned at how casually he said that.

“But I need to make up for acting against our interests.”

“Then how about you go without any dinner? The ceremony is coming up, so a fast wouldn’t be a bad idea at all.”

“I’m not talking about something personal. I mean something to help the organization-…”

“Do you see an organization anywhere around here?”

Double Lee cut her off.

“All I see is myself walking at the forefront of the words Master Huang left us.”

His smile had vanished.

“I must guide everyone else. And I do not believe I ever required that the rest of you follow me.”

“…”

Genius lowered her gaze a little.

“Why are you so intent on this?”

“On what?”

“On continuing this ceremony even though it will kill so many people. You even returned badly injured after fighting J-Gun’s brother. …What are you thinking?”

“If we were an organization, that would be a decent criticism.”

He gave a slight bitter smile and sighed.

“Hong Kong’s history contains several wars that killed many people. I am sure everyone lamented those losses as you are now. …But I do not mind and I can heal myself even if I am injured.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. …Why are you so intent on this?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“You can read my Live, but I can’t read yours.”

“A fair answer. …But I would like to hear a more direct answer.”

She hesitated at that.

“…”

She loosely crossed her arms by her waist and looked him in the eye.

“I want to know why J-Gun died.”

“I see.”

Double Lee sighed and sank deep into his chair. The tips of his main wings, the longest of the six, slid on the linoleum.

He continued looking Genius in the eye.

“That was not mentioned in Master Huang’s instructions or in his predictions. His instructions simply said to have J-Gun make the Device.”

“Isn’t that because Master Huang’s instructions aren’t absolute?”

“Are they not?”

“Perfect predictions are impossible. He couldn’t possibly account for everything.”

“But what if he could?”

That question confused Genius.

“…?”

“This is an old story, but a human man and a Nein Engel woman once fought a Nein Engel man and read the Live of time.”

“…Eh?”

“Before, they had only been able to read the past, but using a certain individual’s instructions, they read the future. …Master Huang was one of those who read the Live of time.”

Genius uncrossed her arms.

“Do you…do you really believe that!?”

“I do. And as proof, Master Huang died. As an Archs, he was the closest being to god and thus should have had a long, illness-free life. And yet, he aged.”

“How is that proof? Are you saying that was why he died!?”

“It is simple.”

“…”

“Master Huang realized Hong Kong’s future was headed toward destruction, so he resonated with the other two who had read time with him and they broke down the Lives of Hong Kong.”

He took a breath.

“Then, the three of them swapped out their own lifespans with Hong Kong’s lifespan.”

“…”

“Master Huang in particular received a large portion of the destruction, so he did what he could to keep his own destiny from overlapping with the other two’s. Those other two left a prophetic song in the time period they found themselves in…and then they returned to their original time period.”

Double Lee kept his eyes on Genius the entire time.

And Genius kept her eyes on his.

“Then what was J-Gun’s death?” she asked.

“Proof that the future is changing.”

“To something different from the future Master Huang saw…and different from the one he was trying to create?”

“Yes. Most likely…”

Double Lee closed his eyes.

“We are paving the way ahead.”

As soon as he said that, his eyebrows moved slightly.

“Genius, J-Gun is coming to a stop.”

“J-Gun is?”

“Yes. Based on his Live, he is slowly adding the finishing touches to his work. It should take…another half day.”

Genius reacted to the word “work”.

She frantically turned toward the automatic door behind her.

“Genius, you are getting ahead of yourself. He will not be done until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

“It’s never too soon or too late to start waiting.”

She reached for the button to open the door.

“Double Lee.”

“Yes?”

“Did Master Huang’s instructions about the future or destiny or whatever… Did they mention the bottle of his blood breaking?”

“Do not worry. I have a way of acquiring blood filled with the power of Yang.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I have a sister, so everything will work out.”

“!?”

“Please do not look so shocked. Besides, your blood or Fei’s would not work.”

Genius steadied her breathing and let out a deep sigh.

“I don’t understand you.”

“Why not?”

“I can never tell if you mean what you say or not.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

After nodding, Genius pressed the button.

The door quickly opened and she passed through the newly-formed opening.

She walked forward.

Part 4

The hour hand and minute hand were both approaching the top of the clock, meaning it was almost midnight.

The General was facing a guest in his house.

The guest was Rin.

Hey sat in a Chinese-style wood-floored room containing only a television and a round table.

Like a true Hong Kong resident, the General was dressed in a polo shirt and chino pants.

Even though it was summer, Rin wore a black combat suit and a black leather jacket over that.

She had swapped out her glasses for mirrorshades with a similar design.

She was dressed to head off to battle somewhere.

The General kept his eyes on her.

“Want some tea, Rin?”

He held out a teacup filled with tea he had made.

She smiled bitterly and gently raised a hand.

“No, letting me in your home is enough.”

“You sure are cold.”

“Am I?” She nodded. “But I am surprised.”

“About what?”

“That you let me in when you’re usually so secretive.”

“Don’t be surprised by that. I knew your old man… I even knew when you were born.”

“But you always held training at my house.”

“I like houses with big yards.”

“…You really are kind.”

“Hm? You say something?”

“You’re trying to change the subject.”

“Am I?”

“Is it because tomorrow is the end?”

He answered her with silence.

And that lack of a response was a sort of response.

So Rin nodded again.

“June 29 is ending.”

“Yeah.”

And tomorrow at midnight, Hong Kong will be returned from England to China, but the metal Earth Serpent still hasn’t been created. The Sixth Divine Punishment accelerated the four elements, but they have yet to be activated.”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you here, General?”

“I’m not plannin’ to die, if that’s what you’re askin’.”

“Are you planning to fight?”

“Ridiculously enough.”

“?”

“There are some weirdos in the Yard who’ve stuck around to see me in action.”

“You have some excellent subordinates, don’t you?”

“So do you.”

“You mean Kouga?”

“Yeah. He found the Device that Akira seems to have dropped. And he brought it to J-Gun’s workshop to help out Gunmal.”

After confirming what that meant, Rin spoke up.

“Do you think Gunmal can make Devices for himself and Akira?”

“I don’t know what he thinks he can make in just five days.”

“What did he say?”

“That if he couldn’t make anythin’ in five days, he’d be so embarrassed he’d head back home. The bastard’s probably makin’ a run for it right now.”

The General turned back toward Rin.

“Rin.” He sighed. “I’m gonna change the subject and lecture you, okay?”

“Okay?”

“A woman shouldn’t be makin’ her chest flatter. Got that?”

“You can tell?”

“You’re standin’ on two legs, aren’t you? …Plus, I’m your master.”

“That’s true,” she said with a slight smile.

She reached for her mirrorshades and shifted them out of the way.

Beyond the two mirrors, her right eye was green and her left was red.

“How do you like it? I took my time choosing just the right colors.”

“They look like candy.”

“Sorry.” Rin smiled bitterly. “But modern body customization technology has advanced farther than you know.”

“Where’d you get it done?”

“A virtual workshop in Detroit. There, I could have myself digitized rather than going through a surgery. I left my body here and had the customization done in the computer.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s about what I discussed with Gunmal. …That had to have cost a fortune and you didn’t tell your old man.”

“I’ve been working as a detective for five years without marrying, so I can afford this much.”

“Hm. …Well, is it all workin’ out all right?”

“That’s why I had the original data stored away. That took some time since I swapped out everything but my head and torso, but if something happens, it won’t be hard to return to my original body.”

“I’d recommend not returnin’ that one leg to normal.”

“True. But I got a look at the hardened Lives from the lost leg, and it looked like another Tuner might be able to heal it.”

“You don’t find Tuners on your level every day.”

“You’re one, aren’t you? Not to mention Akira.”

“I’m too old and Akira has bigger things to worry about.”

The General pointed toward the wall behind him.

Rin frowned at the gesture.

“Is Akira here?”

“Yeah.”

She tilted her head.

“Why do you always watch over her?”

“Jealous?”

“Curious.”

“You can be a lot like Gunmal sometimes.”

“But…could you maybe answer me? You’re famous for hating Nein Engels, so why do you look after Akira and why do you always hide anything about your family or home? I’ve always wondered about that.”

“Would a made-up story suffice?”

“If the truth is hidden in it.”

The General looked out to the yard.

“…?”

He heard rain and Rin looked in the same direction.

“It’s raining.”

“It’s not a bad rain.”

“Are you going to quit talking?”

“No, we can keep goin’.”

They faced each other again.

After a breath, the General opened his mouth with the growing pitter-patter of rain in the background.

“Then listen up.”

“Sure.”

“Is it possible for someone to be born the same person but end up as two different people?”

“…Eh?”

“So. What if I was born as Lee Hu?”

“Stop joking.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I saw Lee Hu die. Akira was with me…and so were you. We buried his remains in his grave,” explained Rin. “So you couldn’t possibly be Lee Hu.”

The General nodded.

“Then this is my final question.”

“Go ahead.”

“If you wanted to travel through time and change the past, would you need to entirely rewrite the time period or would you simply need to add a single new element brought from the future?”

“…”

“Here’s a hint. …I made sure the mistake I made would never be made again. When I was born, there was no Flight Song in Hong Kong.”

“No Flight Song? But that song has existed since Hong Kong Cave was made.”

“And that’s my hint. A hint only me and my wife know now.”

Rin frowned a little.

“Can I answer that along with your previous question?”

“Sure.”

“Are you saying Lee Hu travelled to the past without returning to the present, did something to become known as ‘the General’ during the Fourth Divine Punishment War, and corrected the next Lee Hu’s actions so he would not end up the same?”

“C’mon, now. You’re not makin’ any sense.”

“No, that makes perfect sense. When your next self was going to travel back in time, did you tell him to create the Flight Song that would support Hong Kong? And after returning to the present, Lee Hu left the rest to Akira and the others and died, so you felt you owed him something.”

“Like I said, it’s a made-up story.”

As soon as he said that, the clock on the wall began to ring.

It rang quietly but deeply twelve times to tell them a new day had arrived.

“It’s the thirtieth now.”

“That was pretty loud. I hope it didn’t wake Akira.”

“Are you sure she isn’t already listening in? She’s pretty sensitive to Lives.”

“No. She can’t use Tunin’ at the moment.”

“Can’t use Tuning? …You mean like how I used to be?”

The General nodded.

“She’s afraid.”

“Afraid, hm?”

“Yeah. She’s so freaked out that she doesn’t like havin’ her hand touched. …And ridiculously enough, she thinks she’s hidin’ it, but it couldn’t be more obvious.”

“That’s because…Tuning is a weapon. A handgun is less of a burden.”

“Hey, Rin.”

“Yes?”

“I hate to dig this back up now, but what happened with you was an accident.”

Rin fell silent and he took a sip of tea.

“And it was the proper punishment for those fools who go out huntin’ Nein Engels.”

“Then why was I punished too? All I did was try to save Fei…”

She sighed, and…

“Akira is probably feeling the same thing.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“The best plan would be to abandon Hong Kong and flee. …Akira’s brother, Lee Leed, is going to activate the metal Earth Serpent. And the only way to fight back…”

“Yes?”

“No, it’s too reckless.”

“Out with it.”

“Aren’t you already thinking the same thing?”

“That’s why I want to hear you say it.”

“You would have to activate an equally powerful Earth Serpent. In other words, a Yin one equal to Lee Leed’s Yang one. If the two counteracted each other, it would all come to an end.”

“Is that…really the only way?”

Rin gently lowered her head.

“But that would be impossible,” she said. “Earth Burns of the four elements are needed to activate the Earth Serpent, but even if we could activate new Yin-oriented water, earth, and wind ones, we lack the catalyst needed to activate the fire one. Also…”

“Who would we draw the Yin power from?”

“Yes. The Lives of Yin and Yang are one of the three secret techniques of Tuning and Busting. There’s no one in Hong Kong we can draw that power from anymore. Besides, the Live of Yin is based in the moonlight that opposes the sunlight, but…”

“?”

“Unfortunately, General, this rain is supposed to continue for several days.”

The General frowned at that.

“Um, Rin, I’m not sure I like the idea of decidin’ Hong Kong’s fate based on the weather forecast.”

“Try to face reality. A powerful typhoon is approaching from the east-northeast. The winds apparently reached High Powered City – Taiwan about an hour ago.”

“It’s true the winds are pretty still right now. …That would explain why the cicadas have been so loud all day.”

“Rain will further remove the chances of finding a catalyst for the fire element. …There’s no saving Hong Kong now.”

Rin stood up.

“You said Kouga is at J-Gun’s workshop, right?”

“No, I told him to head to the Yard. I have some business with him. …You want to say hello?”

“Yes. Him at least…I don’t want to die.”

“He’d cry if he heard you say that. And he’d say he’d follow you until the day he dies.”

“Yes, and that’s why I won’t say it to him.”

As soon as she said that, a gust of wind hit the window.

The sound of the wind filled the room.

And a moment later, rain sprayed against the glass.

The rain seemed to fall sideways.

The Genseral looked to the window as it rattled from the wind and rain.

“Weather forecasts these days have a real attitude.”

“Could I borrow an umbrella?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. …When my custom body gets wet, I feel like it’s soaking directly into my Live.”

Rin left the wood-floored room and the General called after her.

“You’d better return that umbrella.”

She did not respond.

Part 5

The underground workshop J-Gun had holed up inside had grown silent.

The workshop was a square with twenty meter sides and it rose to a height of three stories. It was the largest of the building's underground rooms.

After pushing open the bulkhead-like door, Genius saw darkness enveloping the large space.

There was no light.

It was underground and J-Gun did not need light since he could see Lives.

She found absolute darkness.

She hesitated and checked the clock.

It was 6:00 AM on June 30.

"It's probably okay if I come in now."

She muttered to herself and took a step inside.

The darkness enveloped her as well.

"Let there be light."

She snapped her fingers in the darkness and light appeared.

A glowing halo appeared a mere thirty centimeters above her head.

It resembled a transparent fluorescent light, it appeared to be quickly rotating, and sharp pieces of light would occasionally scatter from it.

Genius caught the halo on her fingers and grabbed it.

When she passed her hand through it like a bracelet, it continued to rotate but stayed around her wrist.

She looked around with it on her right arm.

The white light illuminated the workshop.

A few concrete pillars, the gate for the elevator that brought in supplies, a lathe, and large steel panels for materials all became visible in the light and shadow.

Also, a single figure could be seen in that space of metal and stone.

It was J-Gun.

He sat on one of the I-beams lined up in the center of the workshop and he had his back to Genius.

"…J-Gun."

She walked forward as she muttered his name.

Her heels rang loudly on the concrete floor.

After about a dozen of the hard sounds, she stood behind him.

The man's back was right in front of her.

The back of his combat blouson was bent from his hanging head.

He almost seemed to have fallen asleep while sitting, but corpses did not sleep.

He had simply stopped until he felt he had a new mission.

"Just like a machine."

She did not smile as she said that and circled in front of him.

J-Gun was still wearing his glasses and the eyes behind them were closed.

He did not move or even breathe.

"…"

She looked away and noticed something on the floor.

What Double Lee had requested was placed on the concrete.

"The Device."

Two swords were there.

One was what J-Gun had been using. Its colors had grown clear and all of its previous scratches were gone, but that was the side effect of forging another one with it.

"He took good care of this for so long."

With a bitter smile in her voice, Genius looked to the other one.

It was quite different from all the Devices she had seen in the past.

It was a short sword.

J-Gun's Device was long at a meter and twenty centimeters.

The ADs which had activated the four Earth Burns had been over a meter.

But the final Device in front of Genius was only about sixty centimeters, including the hilt.

It was shaped like an expensive paper knife.

But Genius could not take her eyes off of it.

“Amazing…”

She stared at the light reflected from its short blade.

“It’s like a mirror…or the water’s surface at night.”

As she spoke, the light flowed along the blade.

And that was not a metaphor.

The blade reflected the light wrapped around Genius’s wrist and caused the Lives of light to flow toward the blade’s tip.

The light took a droplet shape at the tip, dripped to the floor, and vanished.

Genius gasped.

“So this is what you’re really capable of.”

She picked up the Device.

The light reflected sharply from the blade and sprayed outward.

For an instant, letters appeared on the blade like a watermark.

“Pd.? Period? Is that the Device’s name?”

No one answered her.

She tilted her head and looked away from the light emitted by the blade.

She sighed and placed the short sword back on the floor as light continued to scatter from it.

It made a light, metallic sound.

As she did, her fingers felt something hard on the floor.

“?”

She found a ring there.

It was not a mechanical component like a washer or nut. The surface was polished and processed. It was made from the same light-manipulating metal as Pd.

J-Gun had made it.

“It can’t be…”

She looked to her left hand.

She had once worn a ring there, but she had abandoned it in J-Gun’s workshop on the surface.

“…!?”

She turned around and found J-Gun’s head still slightly lowered. His eyes were closed and he said nothing.

But she did spot a small smile on his lips.

“Am I imagining that?”

She shook her head to reject it.

Still, she took the ring from the floor.

She hesitated for a moment, but she slowly placed it on her left ring finger.

The ritual-like action did not take much time.

The ring fit in place and silently reflected the light.

“I don’t understand. I was too afraid to ask…but what did Double Lee say to you to resurrect you?”

She faced J-Gun while sitting on the floor.

“You had to have been able to read my Live, so why did you stay with me?”

She took a breath.

“Will you tell me someday?”

There was of course no one to answer or respond to her question.

J-Gun simply accepted her words without moving.

Part 6

Akira listened to the rain outside the dark window behind her.

She had changed into her Yard uniform and she sat below the vase containing the jinyinhua and feather. She placed her left arm on the wall and felt the characteristic damp chilliness of an earthen wall.

About an hour had passed since she had woken and been able to move her arm.

She had spent the time eating the food the General had left in the hallway.

It was dark outside the window, but the clock had rung nine times earlier.

It was now 9:00 AM of June 30.

…The Earth Serpent will fly tonight.

…There's nothing I can do. I wouldn't be any help…and my room was ransacked.

She sighed.

The light meal seemed to have given her some energy.

The room was dark from the typhoon, but she looked around while holding the broken Nein König.

Her senses had grown more sensitive to her body and her surroundings.

She could hear the wind.

She could hear the rain.

But those were mere noises.

Neither the wind nor the rain showed its Message.

The same was true of the darkness in the room. The daytime darkness brought by the storm clouds felt no different than having her eyes go bad.

…What am I supposed to do now?

As soon as she wondered that, she heard a sound through the walls.

She heard footsteps.

They belonged to the General.

They were approaching her down the hallway.

Akira faced the door with her eyes still closed.

…Is he bringing breakfast?

She frowned in her heart because that made her feel like a freeloader.

But as if to ignore her thoughts, she heard something being placed in front of the door.

Then she heard the General's voice.

"You awake?"

"Oh, yes," she answered.

She heard a quiet laugh from beyond the door.

"Good. You youngsters have so much energy."

…Not really.

She tilted her head and heard more from beyond the door.

"You're hidin' your Live pretty well there, Akira."

She looked up at those unexpected words.

…I'm hiding my Live? Now?

She was not doing so consciously, but he was telling her he could not see it.

The words beyond the door continued.

“Yet I could still see plenty when you woke up yesterday.”

She gasped, but he was not done.

“Gunmal wasn’t showin’ his either. …Is that the latest fad with you youngsters?”

“No…it isn’t.”

“Then is it not some short-lived thing?”

She did not answer.

She simply looked at Nein König in her arms.

The mass of metal told her nothing, but she still stared at it.

The beautiful steel Device looked like a musical instrument. She noticed slight scratches and chips on its surface and corners.

Those were evidence that Gunmal had used this Device for years.

As it received her gaze in the dim light, the Wild Emblem of the Maldrick family glowed dully. She could see two dragons dancing within the round relief.

And as she looked at it, her lips began to move.

“Why am I… No, why does Gunmal hide his Live?”

Her own words confused her.

…Why am I saying this?

But before she could find out, a voice reached her.

“He’s makin’ Devices right now. At that workshop.”

“Eh?”

Just as she looked up in surprise, her shoulders touched something.

It felt raw and soft, almost like lips.

The surprise caused her pulse to race.

“…?”

She looked over at her shoulder and found some yellow flower petals.

It was a jinyinhua flower.

It had fallen from the vine growing in the wall-mounted vase.

She stared at it.

After a few breaths of silence, she moved.

“…”

She suddenly but slowly moved.

She took her time to hesitantly stand up.

And as she took the first step forward, Nein König slipped from her arms.

“…!”

When she let out a voiceless scream and crouched down, she heard a voice from beyond the door.

“I’ll be goin’.”

She did not answer, but she did nod.

She heard the front door slide open and the sounds of the storm grew louder.

“Don’t bother lockin’ up when you leave.”

Finally, she heard the door slide shut.

She was cut off from the outside world once more.

She was alone in the house.

“…”

She held her breath and stared at Nein König and the yellow jinyinhua flower on the floor.

She picked up the flower and placed it on top of the Device.

She sighed and stood back up without smiling.

The vase was at eye level.

It contained the jinyinhua which had dropped a single flower and the single feather.

She started turning away to face forward, but…

“Huh?”

She noticed something.

Her eyes stopped on the feather that shined a golden white in the dimly lit room.

“This feather…”

She spoke the truth before her eyes as if reflecting on the fact.

“It isn’t mine.”

…*What does that mean?*

She had no way of answering that.

She kept her eyes on it while slowly walking away.

She arrived in front of the door and steadied her breathing.

She slowly opened it to find the entranceway.

The door to leave this house appeared before her eyes.

As she started toward it, she found something left in the entranceway.

It was what the General had left for her.

She had expected a tray carrying breakfast, but it was an umbrella.

“It’s storming outside, isn’t it?”

She picked it up and nodded with a tense expression.

“Everything might be blown away.”

Interlude 4

The rain had grown stronger.

So had the wind.

It was past noon, but Akira stood in the thick darkness, wind, and rain created by the storm.

She was in the center of Yau Ma Tei, where most of the buildings and homes had collapsed. J-Gun's workshop was there. Or more accurately, had been there.

The workshop had been destroyed.

There must have been an explosion inside because it and the attached home had scattered fragments of stone and wood outwards.

A small mortar-shaped crater had formed where the workshop must have been.

Needless to say, there was no one there and rainwater had pooled to knee height at the bottom of the crater.

"…I can't believe this."

Akira's shoulders drooped as she held the umbrella in both hands.

"I can't believe this."

She repeated herself.

She looked down.

The stone of the workshop had shattered to the point that the ground looked like the rocky bank of a river.

A fist-sized emblem had fallen among the stones there. The black stone was engraved with two dragons spiraling around each other.

That was the Wild Emblem of the Maldrick family.

“And after I came all this way in the rain…”

She kicked the Wild Emblem stone.

With a solid sound, it split down the middle.

One dragon fell in the crater and sank into the water.

The other was covered by the umbrella Akira had been holding.

“You idiot.”

She did not bother picking up the dropped umbrella.

She crossed her arms as if embracing herself.

And then she looked up at the rainy heavens.

Clouds covered the sky, creating a stormy darkness.

Water was falling from them.

The clouds moved in a number of arcs as the storm clouds made Hong Kong their home.

And Akira spoke into that sky.

“Gunmal…”

Her voice was drowned out by the storm and never reached the heavens.

The day continued within the darkness of the storm.

Night would soon arrive.

Act 7: Gunmal (1:23)

Part 1

By the time Akira arrived at her apartment, night had already fallen over Hong Kong.

After checking on the destroyed workshop, she had walked to the Yard and to the inn at which Gunmal was staying.

The Yard's base had received her with silence.

She could tell someone had been there just a few hours before, but she had found no one there. Gunmal's inn had also been empty to the point that it was a mystery who had been staying in which room.

She was currently walking back to her own home without using an umbrella.

The clouds violently swirling through the sky kept her from telling the exact time, but the darkness descending from that sky had nearly grown as deep as it was ever going to.

She looked north as the rain hit her.

She could see the mountains of the Kowloon Peninsula beyond the shortened buildings.

Dark clouds were falling from directly above them. The ink black clouds were soaked with rain and the night.

A closer look showed some brightness on the bottom of the clouds.

The lights of the Chinese mainland were reflecting off of them.

“…”

After watching that for a while, Akira looked straight up.

Dark clouds wandered above Hong Kong as well, but they remained entirely dark.

She realized what was causing that difference, so she hung her head and remained silent.

She was soaked with rain, but she said nothing and trudged forward without running.

The next thing she knew, she had finished climbing the stairs to her apartment.

The corrugated plastic roof was audibly trembling from the rain.

Her soaked shoes produced wet squishing sounds as she walked down the corridor.

She soon arrived before her own room, stuck her key in the knob, and unlocked the metal door.

She opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind her to cut off the sounds from outside.

She could now only hear the pitter-patter of rain on the roof.

“…”

She silently took a step from the entranceway to the empty kitchen.

But that was as far as she got.

With a small sigh, she fell to her knees.

She hung her head, bent over, and placed her hands on the floor.

Then she gave a much deeper sigh.

At the same time, the bathroom door beyond the kitchen opened and bright light shined out.

Finally, Gunmal stepped out.

Part 2

With a bath towel over his shoulder, he spotted Akira.

“Hey, welcome back. The bath’s ready.”

She slowly looked up at him.

“…?”

She asked “why?” with only the look in her eyes, so Gunmal answered while sticking his hands in the sink.

“You didn’t have a fridge and you’d left the water on for a while, so I figured you wouldn’t mind.”

With a splash, he pulled out two cans of beer.

He placed on in front of Akira and kept the other one for himself. He opened the pull tab and the carbonation audibly escaped.

All he had to do was drink it.

After two gulps, he took a breath and looked to Akira.

“…What’s the matter? What’s that look for?”

She opened her mouth and tried to say something, but only a sob escaped.

"…!"

She silently released a few things she wanted to say and they were all summed up what spilled from her eyes: tears.

Gunmal seemed to panic.

"W-wait, wait. What's this about all of a sudden?"

She did not respond, so he brushed a hand through his damp hair and tilted his head.

"C'mon, cheer up. Look, I'll bet you'll like this."

He moved to the back room for a few seconds and returned with a Yard cap in his hand.

He placed it on Akira's head so it hid her tearful face.

"I got a little carried away and blew up the workshop, so I carried my stuff back to the Yard. But the place was deserted, so I had no choice but to come here about two hours ago."

"…"

"And y'know what? Those kids you were teaching Tuning to? A bunch of them showed up and left some stuff here. Like a picture frame and a sanxian."

"A picture frame…and a sanxian?"

She let out a shaky voice when she heard the names of the objects she had thought were lost.

Gunmal nodded.

“They said something about their dads and some other people trashing this room, but they were talking so fast I didn’t catch it all.” He sighed. “Well, one of them left that hat.”

Akira lowered her head at that.

Then she sobbed and let out a choking sigh.

After a beat, she started crying again.

“Damn, it had the opposite effect.”

Sounding troubled, Gunmal sat down.

“Really, what’s the matter?”

Akira called the name of the man who asked her that.

“…Gunmal.”

“Hm?”

“…Gunmall.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“…Gunmalll!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah?”

“Gunmal!”

“I get it, I get it. Hey, quit rubbing at your eyes.”

He grabbed the hand she was pressing to her face and that action gave her the opportunity she needed.

She moved up the arm grabbing her and collapsed into his chest.

“Hey, wait! And I only just got changed into dry clothes…”

She wrapped her arms around his back to cling to him and refused to let go.

And she spoke to no one in particular.

“You really do show up when I call for you…”

By the time she finished muttering those words, his arms had wrapped around her back as well.

Her tears began to dry up and he asked something.

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

“…You can’t see my Live, can you?”

“…”

He remained silent and that was enough to answer her question.

So she smiled bitterly.

“That’s what happened. …Yeah.”

“I don’t mind.”

He spoke quietly and moved a bit back from her.

Her teary eyes and his eyes met at the same level.

“I’ll be borrowing those lips.”

“You really are forceful.”

Akira smiled a little and closed her eyes.

Gunmal’s lips met with hers.

She could not sense Lives at the moment, so it was just the one sensation.

The action ended after a mere two seconds.

The removal of her vision let her sense the dampness of his lips all the more as they left hers.

She heard his voice from close enough that it drowned out all other sounds.

“I see.”

He let out a sigh and she asked him something.

“You understand?”

“I understand a lot now. …And I’ve learned my lesson too.”

“About what?”

“Well,” he hesitantly replied. “I can’t have the woman I kiss thinking my breath reeks of beer.”

“I-idiot, you don’t have to read that much!”

“Shut up. And don’t worry. Your Live isn’t dead yet.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Really really?”

“Really really… You’re pretty argumentative today, you know that?”

“What’s wrong with that? I want to make sure of some things, okay?”

She sounded relieved and she rested her head on his shoulder.

He stroked her wet wings.

“You’re going to catch cold. Go take a bath.”

“Sure.”

“…”

“…”

“C’mon, get going.”

“Sure.”

She agreed again but did not move, so Gunmal tilted his head.

“Y’know, you do feel pretty cold right now. You need to get going before you really do catch cold.”

“I know that, but…”

“But?”

“Didn’t you read what I was thinking before?”

“What might that have been?”

“Well…um…”

“Out with it.”

“Ah. …Is that any way to speak to a woman?”

“Don’t get mad. So what is it you want to say, Akira?”

She frowned at that question.

“You mean you really didn’t read it earlier?”

“I mean I really want to know what you’ve been trying to say since earlier.”

“Well…”

Her cheeks flushed a little and she turned her head away from Gunmal.

“Um…”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been thinking, and this is the best way of doing it. I don’t have any ulterior motive.”

“Best way of doing what?”

“…I want to learn a lot about you.”

“Ohhh. And what is this ‘best way’ you were talking about?”

She stopped moving when she heard his tone of voice.

“…You’ve caught on, haven’t you?”

“Oh, you noticed?”

He let out a bitter laugh and she dug her fingernails into his back while blushing.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! I’m still not fully healed, you know!?”

“I don’t care! You shouldn’t tease people!”

“Sorry, sorry. …You’re quit the romantic for a woman, Akira.”

“Don’t guys normally read too much into things instead of too little!?”

“Yeah, but I’m a realist.”

“You could have balanced this out if you were a feminist instead.”

“Anyway, enough with the jokes.” He nodded and his tone grew suddenly serious. “Why do you want to read my Live?”

“You didn’t see that when you kissed me?”

“…Are you serious? As you’ve realized, Tuning can easily become a dangerous weapon.”

“But I don’t think that’s all it can be.”

“…”

Gunmal fell silent, but she felt strength fill his arms on her back.

Then she heard his voice.

“You saved me.”

Akira’s eyes widened at that.

“Um, Gunmal, make no mistake here.”

“?”

“What I want…really isn’t just the practical side of things.”

“Yeah, I saw that too.”

“Like you said, I’m a romantic.”

“Then let me give you my opinion as a realist.”

“Hm?”

Gunmal quietly and heavily answered her questioning tone.

“Hurry up and take a bath.”

Akira jabbed her nails into his back.

Part 3

Gunmal’s things were piled up in a corner of the bedroom.

Two of his sleeping bags were spread out to form a simple mattress by the window.

The only other things in the room were the darkness of the night and the sounds of the storm coming from the roof and window.

That was all.

As Akira sat on the sleeping bags, the supposedly familiar room felt strangely large.

She wore a single Nein Engel shirt and Gunmal was embracing her from the side.

“How strange… When I first met you, Gunmal, I never thought we would doing this.”

“Really? I kind of had an inkling.”

“Why? Because you believe in destiny?”

He lightly shook his head.

“Because…I’m a pervert.”

“You can make jokes, but please make it something better than that. …Hey, quit unbuttoning my shirt.”

“Too late.”

Nein Engel clothing was made to hang from the neck so it would not obstruct the movement of their wings. Removing the button at the bottom of her neck was enough for it to fall to her waist.

She held the falling collar up with her hands.

“Did you turn over that picture frame you showed me earlier?”

“Yeah. Your parents were looking disgusted with their delinquent of a daughter.”

“That would be nice…”

Her voice trailed off.

“Wait, Gunmal. Don’t move your hands like that. It’s too lewd.”

“That’s kind of the point, you know?”

“You really don’t know how to set the mood, do you? …Ah.”

“Ah?”

“Don’t ask that. Be quiet.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“C-c’mon. Say something when you’re touching me. It’s scary.”

“Like what?”

“Anything.”

“Um… I think the greatest problem facing modern European industry is the regional disparity in education. Being good at soccer isn’t everything.”

“Shut up, you idiot.”

“So am I supposed to say something or shut up?”

“Don’t blame me… I-it’s my first time, so…ah!”

She cried out as Gunmal’s hands quickly removed her shirt.

She shrank back in surprise.

“O-oh, no. Do you think someone could see me through the window?”

“It’s frosted glass.”

“Then the lights. Turn out the lights.”

“They’re already off.”

“Th-then don’t look.”

“Don’t ask the impossible. Besides, you might want to use your hands to hide something other than your face.”

“But I don’t want you to see my face…”

“You’re only flushed because of that beer from earlier, right? Oh, and from the bath.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there you go. That settles it.”

He grabbed her hands and tore them from her face.

Her cheeks was an almost desperate shade of scarlet and her eyes were squeezed shut.

Gunmal’s lips met hers.

“…Nn.”

But he did not end with the kiss.

His lips moved down to her neck, her collarbone, and her shoulder.

“Don’t suck on me there.”

“?”

“My clothes don’t cover my shoulders.”

Meanwhile, his flesh-and-blood left hand touched her nervous body.

As his lips moved down the nape of her neck and to her back, his hand slid forward from her thighs and stopped on the most important part.

His hand tickled and his lips kissed parts of her skin that were normally never exposed to the open air.

"…"

As his fingers traced along the curve of her waist, she grew short of breath, so she held her breath to hide it.

She found she could not move her body and realized Gunmal was using his prosthetic right hand to hold her in place.

Her heart skipped a beat at that fact.

She let out a breath and asked a question.

"H-hey, Gunmal?"

Even she was surprised by how weak her voice was.

And as soon as her question smoothly flowed out, Gunmal bit one of the smaller deformed wings on her back.

His teeth reached the bone connecting the small wing to her back and she even felt the bone bending.

A tremor ran through the core of her body.

…!

Her heart throbbed and sweat soaked her.

“S-stop!”

She cried out and moved her wings.

The two main wings rose in the dark room, knocking his arms off of her.

“H-hey.”

Gunmal sounded surprised and like he did not know how to react.

Akira gasped for breath and curled up in his lap.

“What was that about?”

“W-well…”

“?”

“Well…”

“Did I surprise you?”

She took small breaths and gave a small nod to the question asked behind her.

Her sweaty shoulders rose and fell and she slowly got up.

“Y-you’re going too fast, Gunmal. …This is my first time, so don’t restrain me.”

“Sorry.”

He honestly apologized for once and she placed her hand on his right one.

The solid prosthetic hand felt cold and dull, but she placed it on her left breast.

She let out a breath.

It was a deep breath.

“It’s okay.”

Her pulse was racing, but she was breathing deeply with only a bit of heat mixed in.

She closed her eyes and spoke.

“It’s okay. I’m not afraid. …So you don’t have to hold back.”

“…You won’t break?”

“It’s a Tuner’s job to fix anything that breaks.”

As she said that, her face grew so warm she could not ignore it.

She breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.

“…Keep going.”

“Are you sure? I can be forceful, remember?”

“…It’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Ah, b-but… No, not there all of a sudden.”

“You’re contradicting yourself.”

“B-but…”

He tilted his head.

“Hmm. Hey, Akira?”

“?”

“Can I ask something to help this go a lot smoother?”

“Eh?”

She tilted her head while breathing a little heavily and he asked a quiet question.

“How do you do it on your own?”

“Y-you idiot!”

“Hm.”

“Wh-what do you mean ‘hm’!? Read my Live any further and I’ll stop you by force!”

“I see. So you start with the right breast.”

“O-oh, come on!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll change it up a bit to keep things interesting.”

While he followed the usual process she had briefly pictured in her head, his lips also sucked at the areas she could not normally touch: her back, her wings, and even the smaller wings.

It took her a moment to realize his lips moved so smoothly across her skin due to her sweat.

“You really are perverted…”

Despite what she said, she did not move her wings.

Time passed as she let out a few breaths and syllables.

By the time the sweat beaded up on her skin, she was breathing heavily.

And without bothering to catch her breath, she spoke to Gunmal.

"…My Wild Name."

"?"

"It's…Lee Liangyue."

"Liangyue?"

"Yes. …Combine the two characters and you get a character read as 'Akira' in Japanese."

"Are you sure you should tell me that?"

"Yes."

She let out another heated breath.

She seemed to follow the breath down and left Gunmal's arms. She then lay face-down on the soft sleeping bags.

"Akira?"

She gave a meaningless nod to his call.

Without looking back, she gently lifted her hips toward him.

“W-wait, Akira.”

“It’s fine.”

“What?”

“I mean, I have wings, don’t I? So…I couldn’t do it on my back.”

“…”

“You understand. You understand, don’t you? …This is a position of submission. And…”

“Don’t say it.”

She felt Gunmal leaning over her back.

He embraced her from behind as he did so.

She closed her eyes and spoke.

“Please give me…”

She continued after a moment.

“Please give me your Live.”

Part 4

There once was a certain boy.

But Akira did not know how long ago that “once” referred to.

And before even reaching that question, she did not understand what she was seeing and hearing at the moment.

"Eh? This was a little sudden. …What's going on?"

She looked around and found darkness.

She tried holding out her hand, but she could not see it.

This was pure darkness, so she began to panic.

"…Oh, no. Gunmal was embracing me from behind…and then…"

She trailed off from there.

…And then I found myself in this darkness?

A certain fact rang in her mind as if to answer her.

There once was a certain boy.

That fact stabbed deeply into her mind.

Only then did she realize what she was seeing and hearing.

"This is Gunmal's Live."

She tried closing her eyes, but the surrounding darkness remained unchanged. It really was pure darkness.

…I'm directly seeing this with my mind. …This is like a replaying of his memories.

She could not possibly have a body here.

Once she understood that, light appeared in the darkness.

Far, far ahead, a horizontal line of light appeared like the sun appearing behind the horizon.

And with that light as the horizon, the expanse of the sky appeared above and the expanse of the ground appeared below.

Both expanses contained an awkward stream.

A few wave-like motions filled them both and they approached above Akira's head or below her feet. A closer look showed these waves of the sky and earth were not like the waves formed in water. Thousands or even millions of domino-like blocks drew out the sky and earth and those blocks created the waves as they fell over.

And these dominoes formed more than a flat plane.

Whenever they seemed to crawl vertically like caterpillars on a wall, they would produce clouds or buildings. Whenever they seemed to tilt diagonally, they would form rivers or slopes.

A few of the blocks fell from the sky and become wind just before reaching the earth.

"Gunmal's Live is a lot like a pop-up book."

Meanwhile, the stream of dominoes passed by Akira's vision.

In that instant, she felt the wind.

"!"

She sensed the wind's Live, something she had not done in what felt like a long time.

She felt a chill.

…There's no doubting it now.

“Gunmal is showing me his Live.”

She spoke her thought aloud and the position in which she stood grew clear.

The sky was visible overhead and a small village was visible below.

She was positioned high in the sky.

“That won’t do. I can’t see anything from up here.”

She relaxed her mind to keep herself from worrying.

An odd sensation shook her mind to its core.

Deep in her mind, she felt like fingers were tickling her inside her stomach.

“Ah.”

A voice escaped her mind.

…*Oh, no. The sensation from reality is getting mixed in.*

“Something incredible must be going on outside of my mind right now…”

She twisted her mind to reject the somehow pleasant sensation.

She then relaxed herself in a different way. Instead of leaving herself defenseless, she cleared her ears and closed her eyes to place herself amid the silence.

That was the correct decision.

“…”

The next thing she knew, she was standing in a strange world.

The remnants of an unfamiliar village spread out before her eyes.

She saw broken pillars, crumbled walls, scattered roofs, twisted and broken roads, and things that were so smashed their original forms had been lost. Gathered altogether, they created the ruins of a village.

She was standing in the center of it all.

"!?"

She knew this scenery.

…This is the same as the final Live that J-Gun showed me. So am I seeing this through Gunmal's eyes!?

Her question was answered by seeing a boy standing in front of her. He looked to be seventeen or eighteen and he had the same hair color as Gunmal.

This was J-Gun when he had been a boy.

Two Devices had fallen at his feet.

One was simply cracked and the other was shattered.

"…"

J-Gun picked up the fragments of the shattered one and spoke.

"Our Devices lie in the center of the war. …Brother, which one of us will succeed the Maldrick family?"

And…

“My Device shattered after clashing with yours.”

J-Gun pulled a ring from his pocket and looked to his younger brother’s face.

After a pause, he smiled a little.

“It’s fine. Like this, they won’t even find the bodies buried in graves. …People who wish to live together didn’t need deadly Busters or Tuners in the first place.”

J-Gun threw the ring into the ruins and said more.

“Don’t end up like me.”

As soon as he said that, the footage changed.

As Gunmal, Akira stood in a large stone blacksmith workshop.

It was dark inside.

Gunmal’s gaze was positioned a little higher than in the ruins.

That gaze looked gently across the workshop, looked down about a step ahead, and stopped.

A stone pedestal sat there.

A single Device sat on the pedestal: Nein König.

“…”

Gunmal’s right hand grabbed Nein König’s hilt.

The hand was still made of flesh at this point.

He stared intently at the bladeless sword.

“I won’t need to use my Wild Name now that I’m leaving my family.”

He slowly moved Nein König to his left hand.

He placed his right hand on the stone pedestal and raised Nein König in his left.

He kept his eyes on his right hand the entire time.

At that point, Akira realized what he was about to do.

…*Gunmal!?*

Her mind cried out just as he swung Nein König down.

“Ah.”

He placed a bit of his Live inside the Device.

It was amplified inside and gained a calm Tempo.

In place of a blade, a brave, steel-colored Live burst from it.

With a heavy strike, a curve of steel raced out.

Before her mind could reject the image, Gunmal had Busted his right hand with Nein König.

There was a solid sound and pain.

The pain reached Akira’s mind as well.

“!?”

The pain resonated in her mind and created a Live resonance.

Gunmal's Live – which included his memories and abilities – burst inside Akira.

It was hot.

And with that sensation, the image being shown to her blacked out for a moment.

It was cold.

Gunmal's Live felt hot as it burst within her mind, but the exterior of her mind felt cold in comparison.

With that movement of heat, she felt her mind returning to reality.

She was waking up.

Her mind hesitated to do so and she quickly yet thoroughly experienced his Live inside her before it cooled.

"…Nn."

With a quiet voice, she experienced Gunmal.

What remained inside her body was a thought he sent her and it began with a certain sentence.

She spoke that sentence aloud.

"There once was a boy named Logan Maldrick, hm?"

She smiled bitterly and her mind returned to reality as she asked a question.

"Does that boy…still exist?"

Part 5

Clouds covered Hong Kong.

Below them, the rain had let up and the wind had calmed.

The typhoon had not left Hong Kong. The city had merely entered the calm eye of the storm.

Compared to the clouds circling so intensely in the sky, the night looked heavy and still.

The weight of the night darkly filled Akira's room through the window.

Inside, Akira and Gunmal's viewpoints and gazes had returned to their original positions.

Akira was wearing her Nein Engel shirt and she sat in Gunmal's lap.

She held the sanxian the children had brought for her.

Her father had given it to her as a memento.

Her fingers were strumming it and her voice was singing.

"彼街通天地

"墜朝地仰雲

"昇夜空謳月

"惟望再笑君"

She sang the Flight Song.

She finished the mere four lines of the song and the sanxian grew quiet.

Both of them let out a sigh and Akira spoke.

“I think it’s been ten days since I sang. …I used to sing up on the roof a lot.”

“I know. I saw your Live too.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you hear the Lives now?”

She cleared her ears a little and shook her head.

“No.”

But she gave a small smile.

“But I think I’m going to go.”

“To where your brother is?”

“No. That isn’t what I meant.”

“?”

“I’m going to go find the answer… The answer to a lot of things.”

“But Akira, you can’t Tune, so…”

He sounded worried, but she cut him off.

“You have something too, don’t you? You showed it to me. You have something you’ve always, always trusted in…even if you try to cut it away from yourself.”

With that, she stood up and began to walk.

She walked to a corner of the room where Gunmal's things were piled up.

Hidden by the travel bag and attaché case, were two objects wrapped in black cloth. They were both about as long as Akira was tall.

She grabbed one of them.

The object inside was metal.

It was surprisingly light and she could stand it up on the floor with only one hand.

Then she took a breath.

After a moment, she untied the cloth wrapping.

In the darkness of the night, the black cloth fell away like an empty shell and a pale light filled the room.

What stood on the floor in front of her was a spear-shaped Device.

The hilt was rounded and long.

The blade was wide to better produced Lives.

The giant spear's overall mold resembled a musical instrument.

"It's pretty…"

"Kouga brought me the one you forgot in the hospital."

"And you Busted it to remake it?"

"Yeah. Look, this one actually has a blade."

She looked as instructed and saw a single-edged blade on the end of the spear.

She briefly gasped at the light of the large blade.

“The one I made for myself has a single-edged blade too.”

“Are you going to kill someone?”

“That’s not the point,” he said quietly. “To protect and to hate are two sides of the same coin.”

“You really are strong.”

“It was a certain woman that taught me that.”

“Eh?”

“That winged woman never rejected her own power no matter what happened.”

“…”

“I just wish I’d met her sooner.”

“Thanks.”

Akira removed her hand from the cloth wrapping and let it fall the rest of the way to the floor.

It made a soft sound.

The Device had been precariously balanced on the floor, but now it started to tilt.

She reached out while holding her breath and grabbed the metal hilt.

The roundness of the cold metal caused her pulse to race.

But she did not let go.

After a few seconds, her hand got used to the feeling.

She wrinkled her brow a little, let out a breath, and spoke to Gunmal.

“Hey, don’t you think we would make a good team? That’s the point of these two Devices, isn’t it? The two blades make a single whole.”

“…”

“What are their names?”

“That one is Wild Königin and mine is Wild König.”

As soon as he said that, a distant sound reached them from the direction of the ocean.

It sounded like a great mass of metal had been dropped onto the ground.

It was the low sound of shellfire.

“That’s the old man’s tank, isn’t it?”

“!? So the battle’s started!?”

“No. He’s going to Hong Kong Island…on a boat, looks like. The tank is on the boat. That was probably the sign that he’s leaving.”

“Let’s go, Gunmal.” Akira’s voice was quiet and weak.
“Everyone’s…waiting.”

Act 8: Double Lee (9:13)

Part 1

There was a half hour gap between the first gun blast and the second.

When Kouga heard the second blast on his motorcycle, he was passing through an abandoned shelter in the mountains of the New Territories.

He was in the process of escaping to the mainland.

"…"

The motorcycle came to a stop as its headlight cut through the darkness of the night.

He placed his feet on the road near the peak of the Hong Kong side of the mountain.

The ocean and Hong Kong were to his left and he looked that way through his sunglasses.

There was no light there.

"So I've abandoned my comrades and my family while I escape all on my own, huh?"

His tone was extremely light and he smiled bitterly.

"Still, I have a duty to escape."

He looked to the rucksack on his back.

It contained some documents the General had given him.

Those documents were two old notebooks.

The old man had not said who had written them, but he had said they contained the whole truth of Hong Kong.

Oddly enough, both notebooks had the same title: "1971 – Notes of Certain Tuner". The appearance and contents of the notebooks both seemed different, but the handwriting was the same.

"I don't really get it, but I guess there's some history to these things."

Kouga nodded and recalled when he and the General had parted ways at the wharf two hours before.

The General and the others had managed to get a boat from the little assistance being supplied by the mainland and they had started for Hong Kong Island while fully equipped.

The General had told Kouga the following:

…Take these and go to London.

And he had not stopped there.

…It's that city that created a link between Hong Kong and heaven. However this might end, they need to know everythin'. If you do that now and they react, it'll save us the trouble of cleanin' up afterwards.

"So it's to make sure this isn't all for nothing? The boss said the same thing."

Rin had arrived at the Yard before the General and almost her entire body had been customized for combat.

Kouga had been surprised, but Rin had casually checked over her equipment like normal and urged him to escape Hong Kong. She had given a different reason from the General, but it had been reasonable enough.

…If you survive, we at least won't suffer a total defeat.

He had nodded in agreement, ridden with her to the wharf, and said goodbye to everyone.

The Tank Force, Customs, Ninja, and Hounds remaining in Hong Kong had only numbered at twenty-one, but he had seen them off and waved goodbye.

The rain that had been falling then had since let up.

But it had taken him longer than normal to come this far.

And he had just heard the gun blast signaling the beginning of the fighting.

"…"

He kicked off the ground and twisted the accelerator without saying a word.

The wet road gave a smoothness to his speed and he soon caught a pleasant wind.

The great expanse of the sky appeared up ahead as he drove up the slope.

It was a cloudy sky, robbed of all light.

Below it, he saw the mountain's peak.

Once he crossed it, he would never see Hong Kong again, but he did not slow down.

The motorcycle's headlight extended toward the heavens for just a moment, but then the red tail light seemed to crawl along the earth before vanishing over the peak.

Part 2

The Earth Burns had torn into the crust during the Sixth Divine Punishment War, so Hong Kong Island's shape had changed.

The east and west sides of the island had become cliffs of exposed volcanic rock.

The rock faces curved a bit as they rose about two hundred meters from the ocean surface. The sea breeze that had normally blown across the island ran into those cliff faces, collided with the ocean, and burst into the sky.

The sound of the wind was surprisingly loud and it created a great roar.

Facing the windy rock face on the eastern end of the island was enough to have the blowing wind drown out all other noises.

It was a space cut off from the outside world.

Two figures stood at the top of the cliff.

One was a large man and the other was a slender woman.

They were Fei and Rin.

The two of them were injured.

Fei's left arm had been severed partway down and the spear of light from an anti-demon round was skewered into his left shoulder.

Rin had fallen to her knees, but the only visual damage was the scorched black hair behind her neck.

Rin was fighting much more evenly than during their previous matchup.

Rin had run across Fei almost immediately after landing at Central's port on the north end of Hong Kong Island.

The General and the others had been with her, but they had started fighting J-Gun Maldrick and Genius Elias.

Rin's first job was to draw Fei away from the others and her second was to finish him off.

She had accomplished that first job.

This cliff was three kilometers from Central because they had run at full speed as they fought.

She had used up all of the firearms on her person and thrown them away.

She was now armed with a flat black combat knife.

Fei had tensed the fingers of his right hand and five close-combat Hard Nails had jutted three centimeters out from the fingertips of his hard white false arm.

From there, close-quarters combat had begun.

Rin glanced at the watch on her left wrist.

The bluish-white digital display of the men's diving watch said it was 11:40 at night.

In twenty more minutes, Hong Kong would be returned to China.

"…"

She said something, but it was drowned out by the wind tearing into the cliff.

She closed her mouth and faced forward.

Fei was close enough to reach immediately at a run and he was more damaged, but he was also larger.

She was not yet fully accustomed to her Custom Body and the difference in body size also worked against her.

It was hard to say which one had the advantage at the moment.

Fei was the first to move in order to determine which one of them had the upper hand.

The first thing he did was walk.

Almost immediately, the walk turned into a run.

The spear of light was still stabbed into his left shoulder as he charged toward Rin.

She stood up and kicked forward at the ground of volcanic rock. She made a shallow jump backwards so as not to give him an opening.

Fei's nails stabbed into the space she had just vacated.

The jab using his elbow and forearm set the wind in motion.

As soon as Rin landed, she jumped forward.

At the same time, she kicked at the ground.

First to the right and then to the left.

Her position in the air shifted.

She made a quick and powerful feint.

By the time Fei lowered his hips in a combat stance, Rin had left his field of vision.

She was above him.

To maintain her momentum while leaping, she rotated her body once and used the centrifugal force to drop straight down.

She placed all of her weight on the knife she held in both hands as she launched her attack.

"!"

Fei was slow to react, but he was accurate.

His right arm caught the blade, so it dug into that false arm.

The sound of impact was crushed and the wind rising from the cliff sounded all the louder.

“…!”

One of them shouted something.

In midair, Rin briefly stood on Fei’s arm as if she had no weight.

And she kicked off his arm to pull out the knife.

With an impact, she flew spinning back through the air.

She twisted her body to absorb the blow from Fei’s arm.

Fei was the first to move the next time.

He leaped forward as Rin landed and lowered down.

He thrust the Hard Nails out from the hand held in front of his chest.

His stance and strength were far more powerful than Rin’s.

It was a sharp attack.

Rin took a defensive stance against the mass of great pressure launched toward her.

Instead of fleeing or fearing, she simply took that light stance.

“…”

Some words were spoken.

In that instant, Fei’s right arm scattered.

“!?”

The solid sound was somewhat audible through the wind.

Fei had been thrown off balance in midair and he fell onto his left knee.

Then he looked to his false right arm.

The arm had defended against the knife attack, but it had vanished starting halfway down the upper arm.

It now looked like glass shards.

The wind blew his arm behind him like a comet's tail.

"…!"

This was the power of Tuning.

As proof, a torn piece of paper was attached to the bit of the false arm that remained past his right shoulder.

It was a charm.

Rin had placed it there when making her knife attack and it had paid off here.

She stepped forward at a speed one could call slow.

She targeted Fei's head as he stood up and tried to fall back.

She started to run and in a straight line this time.

She was fast, so she quickly covered the distance between them.

She charged toward his chest and raised the knife in her right hand, but just as she gathered strength, she froze in place in that stance.

Meanwhile, Fei had no means of defending and no weapons with which to fight.

But he moved his thick neck and revealed his intent to fight.

“!”

He twisted his head around to bite into the handle of the spear of light stabbed into his left shoulder.

He moved just like a beast attempting to escape a trap.

The spear of light was pulled from his shoulder and the rest was simple.

As he held the spear between his teeth, the blade swept horizontally toward Rin’s throat.

She had no way of avoiding the slash and the blow sent her flying through the air.

A crack-like line ran halfway through her neck.

Blood spurted out at about the same time as the spear left Fei’s mouth.

Part 3

The Yard unit led by the General was caught in such a hard fight that they could not even approach Hong Kong Cave.

They were in Central’s wharf area on the northern end of Hong Kong Island.

Their opponents were the resurrected J-Gun Maldrick and the light-controlling Genius Elias.

The battle against them had split into two poles.

As soon as they had landed, Rin had spotted Fei and parted ways with them. The four tanks of the Tank Force had faced J-Gun while the remaining twenty people from the Customs, Ninja, and Hounds had faced Genius.

The enemy's movements were accurate.

J-Gun's role was to keep the Tank Force from focusing on Genius.

He would release his Live toward the Tank Force so they had to destroy it with their shells. If he saw an opening in their timing and destructive power, he intended to destroy the tanks.

And since she did not have to fear those powerful weapons, Genius worked to incapacitate all the others. The bullets of light launched from her sword could not be seen, much less dodged.

Ten minutes after the battle began, the treads to the General's Grant had been damaged to the point that it could only move awkwardly in a circle.

The General opened the canopy of the unmoving Grant and poked his upper body out.

He grabbed the machinegun on top of the turret.

"This is insane… It'd be sad to call it what I expected, but it'd be more accurate to say it's what I planned for."

He looked around and found the entire wharf had become a battlefield.

And the winner had more or less already been decided.

In front of him, his two opponents stood in his way.

On his right, two light Scorpion tanks had been knocked on their sides and the injured were hiding behind them.

On his left, another Grant was stopped with the front of the tank torn open.

Behind him, the Yard members who could still fight waited to continue the battle.

They were all facing forward.

Drawn by their gazes, the General also faced forward.

About five meters ahead was the large central road surrounded by giant wharf warehouses.

J-Gun and Genius stood there.

One was the man known as Hong Kong's greatest Buster and the other was a four-winged Nein Engel who could control light.

If not for the battle, the pairing would not have been all that strange.

The General gave a self-deprecating comment as he looked to them.

"So is it just hopeless for an old man to hope to beat you youngsters?"

His question crossed the five meter gap and Genius answered.

HK-YARD

“It is currently 11:47. If you are admitting your defeat, then leave. You might just be able to survive.”

The General smiled bitterly.

“Don’t be stupid. If I ran on home without doing everythin’ I could, my wife’d laugh at me.”

“I take it your wife scares you.”

“No, not really. Do you not know who I am?”

“…Eh?”

“I’m…the General.”

Genius closed her eyes and smiled a little at that.

It could have been taken as a smile of bitterness, of self-deprecation, or of amusement.

“You’re a kind person. Are you telling me to accept the side of myself that hesitated to kill you?”

“Hah, you sure are self-centered. I have no intention of dyin’ just yet.”

“What are you talking about? Look, it’s already twelve till. We’ll be activating the dragon to devour the crust, so the complete destruction of the city will begin in less than five minutes.”

“I see. Then can I ask you one thing?”

“What?”

“If you do activate the dragon, will it stay here on earth or will it ascend to heaven? Which would be the right answer?”

“…”

Genius did not answer his question, but she did reply to him.

“That question is meaningless. We will stop anyone who tries to get in our way like you are now.”

“I see, I see. …Sounds like this night’s gonna be bad for my health.”

“You sound confident. What are you plotting?”

“I’m not plottin’ anythin’. I’m just…how should I put it?”

“?”

“Puttin’ up a hopeless fight to buy some time.”

Genius frowned at that and J-Gun’s shoulders trembled a little.

“…J-Gun?”

Genius’s question did not reach J-Gun.

The man looked back over his shoulder.

There was nothing there, but he continued staring in that direction.

Genius turned back toward the General.

“…Is there something there!?”

“Yup.” The General smiled and nodded. “Our goal was only to land here.”

“!?”

“It’s probably about time. None of the tanks are fully destroyed, no one’s died, and there’s not much fire for how many shells we were throwin’ around. …I guess you could say everythin’s ready now. Right!?”

His last question was directed at his comrades.

And at the same time, he laughed loudly.

Those in the other Grant and behind the toppled Scorpions laughed too.

Twenty-one voices laughed together.

They formed a chorus of laughter.

Genius could not hide her confusion.

“You mean…you didn’t come here to fight!?”

“There’s more than one way to fight. Havin’ a strategy’s what matters most.”

“…”

“Your boss is all alone right now, ain’t he? Since you were dealin’ with us here.”

“…You don’t mean!?”

“That ain’t all. We’ll show you some more tricks later. Like how to simultaneously activate the dragons of the four elements in this incomplete city!”

After the General's shout, Genius grabbed J-Gun's arm.

"J-Gun! We need to get back!"

He did not respond to her.

He simply stared behind them and his arm moved a little.

It was the right arm that held his Device.

He raised that sword Device high.

At that moment, the sound of steel rang out.

It came from the ground.

"Eh?"

A change occurred before she could ask what was happening.

As J-Gun and Genius looked behind them, a twenty square meter area of the wharf's concrete ground rose up.

"!"

With a great roar much like more and more ice breaking, the gray concrete ground stood up and started to fall over like the page of book turning.

"Kyaaah!"

After Genius's scream, J-Gun launched his Live.

The scarlet Live contained a hostile Tempo.

It was a Live of destruction and it quickly tore through the risen concrete wall.

Another great roar rang out.

The large wall of concrete became a band of thousands of black and red Lives as it scattered.

Their view opened up and J-Gun and Genius saw a giant hole.

The hole was too deep to see the bottom and it was pitch black inside.

A man stood on the opposite end of that black hole.

It was Gunmal.

A large Device rested on his shoulder and he looked to J-Gun and Genius with a cigarette in his mouth.

“Oh, did I interrupt your date?”

“No, you idiot.”

Gunmal tilted his head at the shocked complaint and looked away from his brother and that brother’s lover.

His eyes found the General instead.

“You’re late, youngster.”

“If you’re doing well enough to complain, there’s nothing to worry about. I forced my way through from the catacombs in Kowloon, so I’m pretty exhausted.”

“I’ll buy you a sports drink later on, so take this seriously.”

“Take what seriously?”

“The fight between you and those two there.”

“Eh? What about you?”

Gunmal gave an exaggerated tilt of the head and the General frowned.

“Y’know…”

“Oh, what’s this? Are you losing, old man?”

“Do I need to run over there and show you what it means to lose?”

“I’m just kidding.”

Gunmal smiled bitterly and looked away.

He stared at Genius and J-Gun instead.

“Sorry. Akira’s gone to see her brother, so I’ll take you on instead.”

“Akira… You mean Double Lee’s sister?”

“Yeah.”

Gunmal nodded and Genius sighed.

“You really are stupid. Both you and that old man called…the General was it?”

“?”

“Double Lee’s sister will be killed.”

“What?”

A faint harsh tone entered Gunmal’s voice and Genius shook her head.

“This is probably all going according to the future Double Lee chose. …You hadn’t noticed? The Tune Emblems used to complete our ceremonies have to be drawn with the blood of a high-level Nein Engel.”

She looked to the General.

“I will answer your previous question now.”

“…”

“I don’t know what would be ‘right’, but the Earth Serpent that ascends to heaven is what binds Hong Kong to heaven!”

Gunmal began to move when he heard that.

He raised his Device, Wild König, in his left hand.

“Nonsense!”

With that shout, he launched his attack.

It had the Word Color of steel and was filled with his powerful Live.

Part 4

Akira ran through the darkness.

The only light was the portable fluorescent one hanging from her shoulder.

She was running down a passageway in the catacombs under Kowloon Walled City. She had passed through a sealed barrier with Gunmal and had remained with him until quite recently.

As soon as the slope of the passageway had gotten steeper, he had come to a sudden stop.

“Someone up above wants to be my dance partner.”

“Eh?”

“Your partner…is probably even deeper down here. I can feel a tremor in the air.”

“You…won’t go with me?”

“I’ll dance with you later. You’ve gotta save the best for last, after all.”

“I might not win.”

“Weren’t you the one that said you had to stop your brother and draw out the Tune Emblem?”

“It’s true that my brother…needs my blood for his ritual.”

“You could always run away before Hong Kong is returned to China.”

She had shaken her head at that.

“That won’t answer any of my questions.”

“Is losing, getting killed, and allowing Hong Kong to be destroyed one of the possible answers?”

“You’re the one that said to protect and to hate are two sides of the same coin.”

“…You’re a stubborn one.”

He had rubbed her hair and she had felt an indescribably pale, warm-colored Live from his hand.

So she had simply nodded and resumed running.

She was still running now.

Her watch said it was eleven till midnight.

She ran and felt like the darkness was pressing in on her, but she was not afraid.

She was confident Gunmal and the others were behind her and she held Wild Königin even if she could not use it.

She ran until she was out of breath.

The downward-sloping passageway seemed to sap the strength from her legs with each step.

Even so, she kept herself moving forward.

A sudden change occurred.

The weight of the darkness filling the passageway vanished.

"!?"

The wind had changed.

Even if she could not sense a change in the color of the darkness, she could tell she had left the passageway and entered a large space.

She had reached Hong Kong Cave.

…It's chilly.

With that silent comment, she picked up her pace that had slowed a little.

The fluorescent light fell from her shoulder and rolled along the ground, but she still ran. Several changes reached her with each step.

She felt a slight breeze.

Her surroundings grew a little brighter.

She found herself in a residential area.

The concrete floor became stone pavement.

She smelled water.

She smelled moss.

A large space appeared before her eyes.

The stone monument and spring she had seen long ago were still there.

And she saw someone on the water's surface.

"…Brother."

It was a six-winged Nein Engel.

Double Lee stood on the water.

He was facing Akira as if awaiting her arrival.

His small frown was not much different from the look of a young man accusing his lover of being late.

"…"

Akira fell silent and Double Lee remained silent as well.

Akira stopped running and Double Lee remained entirely motionless in midair.

The only sound was Akira trying to catch her breath.

Soon, the blade of Double Lee's short sword Device glowed with a dark inner light.

Her eyes drawn by the light, Akira's gaze stopped on the Device.

"?"

The damply glowing blade reflected the darkness in its smooth surface.

The darkness flowed along the blade, slid down the tip, and gathered there.

Finally, the gathered darkness fell as a droplet.

It was a drop of darkness.

When it touched the water below his feet, it burst.

A quiet splashing sound reached Akira.

And with that sound, Double Lee moved his stopped body.

He raised the short sword and pointed the blade tip directly toward Akira's eyes.

Akira reacted by using both hands to raise her Device that looked too large for her.

There was strength in her gaze but no raw hostility for her brother.

Their gazes met in the air between them.

Akira's gaze was painfully powerful and Double Lee's was cold and emotionless. Instead of repelling each other or clashing with each other, those gazes simply crossed paths.

Neither one looked away from the other.

Akira opened her mouth to say something.

"…"

But no words came out.

Double Lee simply gave a small nod.

He then gathered strength in the hand holding the short sword and inhaled some air.

A moment later, he made his move to settle everything.

Part 5

Fei stood alone in the noisy night.

There was not a hint of light in the vicinity and he was entirely surrounded by the roaring of the wind.

His right arm was slowly regenerating. It had only been Tuned into shards of glass, so it would naturally return to normal given enough time.

The dust-like shards that had scattered on the ground and in the wind started floating over toward him and gathering around where his right arm should be. Their temporary transformation ended and they began retaking their original form, so they burst out into the shape of the arm.

The process should have produced the quiet murmuring of his Live, but it was drowned out by the surrounding wind.

It took a few breaths before the arm returned to normal.

"…"

He remained silent.

The eyes behind his mirrorshades watched his arm regenerate.

Even the Custom Body lining of the arm had returned and the damage from the knife had vanished.

He looked to his feet where a large knife sat on the exposed rock of the ground.

He slowly picked it up in his right hand.

He frowned a little while staring at the blade.

He slowly looked around, but no one else stood there but him.

There was, however, another figure lying at his feet.

It was Rin.

She lay face-up and simply looked like she was asleep.

Her sunglasses had fallen away somewhere, revealing her peacefully closed eyelids.

Her face had gone pale. The blood that should have colored it had flowed out through the slash running halfway through her well-formed neck.

She had not customized her entire body.

That was the difference between her and Fei and that was why she had died.

She was no longer moving in the slightest.

"…"

Fei dropped the knife next to her.

The blade dropped first and it stabbed into the exposed volcanic rock instead of bouncing off.

It almost looked like a gravestone.

He then removed his mirrorshades and sat down next to her.

His face was as expressionless as ever.

"…?"

He asked her something, but there was no response and she did not move.

The dead did not move.

But that definition was suddenly overturned.

“!?”

Rin’s body jumped up and turned toward Fei with abnormal speed.

Her bloody body forcefully embraced him.

For a brief moment, Fei saw two small mole-like holes on her neck, slightly above the wound from his fatal attack.

Fei knew what those holes were: the marks left from a vampire’s fangs.

That female detective’s subordinate had been an immortal young man.

She embraced him and her hand held the knife he had stabbed into the ground a moment earlier.

And she gave a shout.

“Word Accel! Oh, you Lives with an Octave of 12,000!”

Her shout was loud enough to overpower the blowing wind.

The thick knife was a Device and it faithfully amplified Rin’s Live.

“Lu.”

It began as a quiet sound. It was a monosyllabic sound of motion. It had a warm orange Word Color and an accurate three-beat Tempo.

Rin stabbed her blade into Fei.

The Device plunged into the back of his neck to reach the device controlling his modified Brain Bios.

The blade tip tore into the device which had caused him to lose his memories and emotions.

At the same time, he wrapped his right arm around Rin and stood up.

His right hand was stabbed into her back.

The Hard Nails of that hand were entering her body through her back.

“!”

To defeat a vampire, one had to tear out their heart.

Fei was doing that now.

Rin’s mouth opened wide and she shouted something.

The roaring wind swallowed it up, so who could say if it had been her Live or a scream.

But a moment later, something else escaped her mouth: blood.

She coughed up a fist-sized clump of blood which stained Fei’s shoulder.

Strength immediately left her and her entire body trembled a little in his arm.

The Device fell from her hand.

“…”

Her upper body fell limply toward Fei and there was no strength in her eyes.

Fei’s right hand was buried in her back up to the wrist.

His hand was trembling slightly.

One or the other of them muttered something and Fei pulled out his hand.

Rin collapsed to the ground.

Even as her body doubled over, she could still move.

She held a hand to the hole in her back and looked up in front of her.

Fei stood there.

He was looking up into the sky while holding the inner corners of his eyes with the hand he had used to skewer her.

"…?"

He lowered his hand as a look of resignation and confusion filled Rin's face.

He went limp and stopped moving while still staring up into the sky.

Rin briefly saw tears on his face.

But that was an illusion.

The blood on his hand had simply dripped down his cheeks.

Regardless, he had stopped moving.

He silently stared up into the sky, so she lowered her head in his place.

She spoke some words that were drowned out by the wind.

Her lips moved again and again to repeat the same words.

There was no light in the vicinity.

The only sound was the blowing of the wind.

The only two people there had stopped moving.

Part 6

Genius realized Gunmal's fighting style was different from before.

He was releasing his own Live to Bust.

And instead of using the Over Up that J-Gun used, he used a more unique method. It was the same method he had shown her at the very end of their last fight.

It was a pure shout.

"Ah!"

He would raise his voice in a way much like his Live and use that to Bust.

The attacks were heavy and sharp and they had the same destructive power as J-Gun's full power strikes.

…I can see why J-Gun praised him.

She smiled bitterly when she remembered that.

"Who am I even jealous of?"

She released her light.

A spear of light flew in a straight line, but Gunmal's Wild König struck it head-on and it burst.

Gunmal could not possibly move faster than light, so the light had to be moving just as he expected it to.

The Lives of the space around him were working for him.

That was made possible by his shouts and he could freely control those Lives so long as the reverberation of those shouts lingered around him. This was not like the Over Up, which was a contract that immediately came to an end.

Seeing him reminded Genius what Double Lee had said before.

…Do you know the difference between normal people and those known as talented or prodigies?

She now knew the answer.

…There is no difference.

The talented and prodigies needed some kind of method or standard. In Tuning and Busting, that would be the Over Up or Wind Up.

But Gunmal was not bound by such things. He did not use an established Up and produced great power fighting only by the definitions of Busting.

J-Gun, on the other hand, used the Over Up to produce his power.

They both used the best method for themselves.

Currently, their fight shook the wharf.

The battle had moved to the edge of the wharf and into the tourist beach that was perfect for walking.

Genius watched as J-Gun launched a horizontal slash.

“Oh.”

He sent out his Live which had a crimson Word Color and sounded like a low rumble.

It flew toward Gunmal as a giant scythe of light.

“Ah.”

Meanwhile, Gunmal received the Live attack head-on.

He instantly swung Wild König down from above.

The steel-colored pressure struck the ground while also splitting the scythe.

The broken scythe burst and sliced through the thick streetlights of the tourist road behind him.

The sound of slicing metal was followed by the streetlights hitting the ground and breaking.

After one, two, three, four such sounds, Gunmal made his move.

“You’re not the ones I really want to dance with!”

His shout immediately became his Live.

His eyes were directed toward J-Gun in front of him and Genius further back.

He had just swung down Wild König, so he used his entire body to swing it back up and let out a monosyllabic roar.

“Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!”

The emitted Live had a heavy metal Word Color and a Tempo that rumbled in the earth.

This was not a slash or strike like before.

It was a powerful blast.

A pillar of light two hundred meters long and fifty meters wide shot out toward Genius and J-Gun.

Genius had no way to protect herself, but J-Gun took action.

He stood in front of her, prepared his Device at his waist, and shouted a different Live from before.

“Kohhhhhhhhhhah!”

A moment later, an intense blast of light raced from J-Gun’s Device.

The white blast was made from pure solidified light.

It was the same as the light Genius fired.

…He’s using my Live!?

The Live of anyone who used Tuning or Busting was affected by the Live of anyone they had a relationship with.

She had seen something similar when fighting Akira and Gunmal before.

But unlike then, the Live that J-Gun was firing now was strongly mixed with his own Live.

He used the double attack power of light and destruction to intercept Gunmal's Live.

The pure white light collided with the steel-colored light.

The produced sound was powerful, high, and clear. It sounded both like a metallic sound and like an electronic sound.

Afterwards, their Lives burst and scattered through the air.

The dense mist of light spread out before Genius's eyes and briefly robbed her of her vision.

She closed her eyes for just a moment.

When she reopened them, the enemy stood in the blind spot right next to J-Gun.

In the light, Gunmal held his Device at the ready.

…When did he get there!?

Her surprise produced a reflexive shout.

"J-Gun!"

J-Gun faithfully responded to her voice.

Without turning her way, he made an accurate strike with his Device.

An even deeper crimson Live gouged into the gap in the light.

His attack scored a direct hit and the color red scattered.

Gunmal wobbled with his Device at the ready.

And his body burst.

He was not cut or broken. His entire body fell apart as if a thread had unraveled.

“!?”

The scattering Lives were the blue, refreshing Lives of the gently blowing wind. These were not the Lives of a person.

Genius’s eyes widened and she heard a voice from the opposite direction.

“Sorry! I kind of plagiarized that method!”

Before she realized it was Gunmal’s voice, she noticed something different about J-Gun.

A giant blade was stabbed into his back.

Gunmal’s Device grew from J-Gun’s back at an odd angle.

“…”

Without speaking a word, J-Gun’s knees gave out and his body bent forward a little.

Gunmal came into view beyond him.

“I don’t believe it…”

Genius took a step back and Gunmal responded without smiling.

“Just like my brother could use your power, I can use a little of Akira’s power.”

“…”

Genius was dumbfounded, but Gunmal frowned.

He looked to J-Gun who had been skewered by Wild König.

“Stop.”

As Gunmal spoke that word, J-Gun moved.

His head was still lowered, but his legs trembled as he tried to stand up.

Gunmal frowned a little.

“Stop it, J-Gun.”

He could not stop his brother from moving.

J-Gun took a deep breath that was meaningless for a dead body and raised his Device once more.

“Please stop this already, J-Gun!” shouted Gunmal.

But J-Gun gently spread his arms and legs with Wild König still stabbed into him. His stance almost seemed meant to hide Genius from Gunmal.

The Device in his right hand was gently lifted overhead.

Gunmal’s expression crumbled and he opened his mouth to give a shout.

But in that instant, someone stopped the brothers.

It was Genius.

She embraced J-Gun from behind and that was enough to stop him.

The stillness brought silence and they all simply stood there for a moment.

It was a blank moment.

J-Gun was the first to move afterwards.

He slowly stepped back with Genius still leaning against his back.

He took one, two, and three steps before Wild König fell from his slender body.

As if that had been a trigger, he slowly collapsed backwards.

“!”

Genius crouched down to support him.

She rested his upturned head on her shoulder.

…J-Gun!

She gave a silent cry and he turned his head to look at her.

And he spoke one quiet word.

“Sorry.”

That truly was his final moment.

Immediately afterwards, his Live broke down, leaving only his clothes behind.

“…!”

Genius sat on the ground embracing the remaining clothes.

J-Gun's Device made a dry clank as it hit the concrete ground.

"What just happened?" she asked. "Why would he apologize to me!?"

To bring back the dead via necromancy, one needed a condition based on something the dead regretted during life.

Genius realized what condition Double Lee had presented to J-Gun's soul.

"You don't mean…!?"

Part 7

Double Lee looked to Akira.

He stared at her.

He turned his powerful gaze her way and nodded.

"…"

Then he gave a slight smile.

Two simple words escaped his opened lips.

"Thank goodness."

A moment later, he took action.

The tip of his raised Device drew an upwards-facing arc to point downwards.

As darkness flowed down the blade, it stabbed into Double Lee's own body.

Akira heard it plunge into his flesh.

“!?”

She gave a voice of surprise more than a scream.

At the same time, her brother’s body collapsed backwards.

His six-wings bent deeply as if to support his collapsing body.

Needless to say, that was not enough to stop him.

His body fell toward the water.

Blood seeped out from where the short sword had stabbed him.

He spoke quietly with his eyes closed and his hands around the hilt.

“Word Accel. Oh, you Lives with an Octave of 120,000,000.”

Just as he finished his Over Up, he landed in the water.

The soft sound of the splash almost sounded like flapping wings.

“…!”

Akira ran over to the spring and reached out a hand toward him as he started sinking. Her well-formed hand plunged into the water to touch her brother’s wings, but she could not quite reach.

He sank further down with his wings pointed down.

His blood flowed out into the water, but it did not dissolve. Instead, it formed a pattern on the spring’s wide surface.

It created a Tune Emblem.

As it was drawn, his body slowly came apart. He was making his own body a part of the Earth Serpent.

“Wait… Brother!”

As soon as she shouted to him, his blood completed the Tune Emblem on the spring’s surface.

And…

“!”

The ground shook vertically just once.

Akira nearly lost her balance, but she used Wild Königin to support herself. Then, she looked to the Tune Emblem drawn on the water.

It was large enough to fill the entire spring and a single blade was sticking down from the center.

It was Double Lee’s Device.

That Device was made by Hong Kong’s greatest Buster and it had floated up to act as the Baton.

That meant two things.

First, the Tune Emblem had been activated.

Second, her brother’s body had been Tuned and had sunk to the depths of the earth.

She wordlessly gasped for breath.

She was sweating.

“I’m nervous.”

She spoke to herself and wiped the sweat from her brow.

A moment later, an intense pulse-like shaking rose from underground.

The Earth Serpent was waking.

She checked her watch to find it was 11:53.

With seven minutes left, Hong Kong would be utterly destroyed.

Part 8

Hong Kong shook.

Unlike during the Sixth Divine Punishment War, this shaking could not be mistaken for an earthquake. It was a vertical shaking that felt like something was directly striking the underside of the ground.

Gunmal and Genius had both run back to the wharf. There, Gunmal stabbed Wild König into the wharf's shaking ground.

The General and his men only questioned his action for a moment.

They soon realized just what was going on.

The shaking vanished from that corner of the wharf and the General gave a light whistle.

"Did you change the crust here to your likin' before the Earth Serpent could get to it?"

"It's only for the area within twenty meters of me, but I completely remade it. This area should be a safe zone."

"I see."

The General nodded as a great roar surrounded them.

At the same time, the ground outside the twenty meter range Gunmal had mentioned began peeling up and flying toward the sky.

“Here it comes!” someone shouted.

They all turned toward Hong Kong Cave.

Beyond the curtain of stones falling upwards, they saw something unbelievable.

The one kilometer entrance to Hong Kong Cave had opened up on Hong Kong Island’s mountain peak.

A massive pure-white dragon’s head was sticking out from the hole.

It was enormous.

Using the hole as a reference, its neck had to be easily more than three hundred meters across.

“That’s ten times the size of the previous dragon!”

That estimation was no exaggeration.

The dragon was so large it did not seem real.

It was pure white and glowing because it was filled with the power of Yang.

The Earth Serpent raised its head like a snake and tried to leave the hole.

Everyone at the wharf subconsciously put up their defenses, but the dragon paid them no heed.

The rumbling of breaking stone sounded as it extended skywards and its front legs finally left the hole.

Based on the diameter of its neck, the distance from the shoulders of its front legs to its face was approximately 1.5 kilometers.

Its head scattered the small dark clouds floating below the rain clouds.

In all, it was over ten kilometers long.

Its pure-white serpentine body illuminated the typhoon's dark clouds like a glowing tube rotating in the night sky.

The dragon opened its great maw toward the heavens hidden by the clouds.

After a brief delay, a roar rang out.

It was more a physical blow than a sound.

The massive wall of air shook its body, raced through the air as a wave, and slammed into those standing on the ground.

Affected by that impact, the stones taken up from the ground all turned to Lives.

The Earth Serpent raised its head, dragged its body further along, and fell down toward Hong Kong as if to receive those Lives.

Its fall took it toward the Wan Chai district left of Gunmal and the others in Central.

They heard the wind.

The great dragon was pushing out the surrounding air as it fell.

The General's voice shouted over that wind.

"Hey! Is that…Akira!?"

Gunmal looked up on reflex and did indeed see it.

A certain color floated at one point high in the sky near the falling dragon's head.

A slight golden-white flower stood out against the pure white of the dragon.

It was Akira's wings.

She was wobbling and falling after being knocked away by the dragon's movement.

"…!? What are you doing, Akira!?"

Gunmal gave a yell as he pulled Wild König from the ground.

Part 9

Akira did not know what had happened to her.

As soon as she had stabbed Wild Königin into the ground to bear with the shaking, she and the stone-pavement had been carried into the sky.

While hanging down from Wild Königin's hilt, she had been carried to the edge of a pure-white glowing cliff, but then she heard a great roar.

Just as she thought her inner ears had been destroyed, she and Wild Königin were thrown out into the empty air at 1.5 kilometers above the ground.

That was when she had realized what had looked like a pure-white wall had been part of the Earth Serpent.

But that was all.

She could see the typhoon's storm clouds in the night sky.

She could move her body, but the previous noise had left her without a sense of direction or even a sense of up and down.

She could not read the wind and the position and direction of her center of gravity felt vague, like the core of her body was asleep.

She fell backwards.

"A Nein Engel isn't supposed to die from a fall."

A voice seemed to answer that comment.

…*Akira!*

It was Gunmal's voice.

"!?"

She expressed her confusion and the voice continued.

…*Why are you falling!? Aren't you supposed to do something about that Earth Serpent!?*

His voice came from Wild Königin in her right hand.

Wild König and Wild Königin were resonating and he was using that to send his Live to her.

…C'mon, you activate your own dragons! We need to start with the Earth Burns of wood, earth, and water!

"H-how!?"

Gunmal's Live answered.

…Remember the Tuning you wanted to use! You've done enough of the basics now, haven't you!? Let Hong Kong ring in your own way! Or have you still not realized how much I've been pushing you around!?

"Y-you idiot! Why would you say something like that now!?"

…Shut up. I'll prepare the elements of wood, earth, and water. Fire can come later! I'm busy, so I need to hang up.

"Hang up…? Hey! This isn't a cellphone!"

There was no response.

"~!"

Akira gave a voiceless shout and glanced behind her.

She was only five hundred meters from the ground.

…At this rate, I really will die.

That was when she noticed something odd on the ground.

"!"

She saw intense destruction.

The city shook in every direction around Central.

She could not see Lives at the moment, but she could see that.

The Bust strikes continued for more than two kilometers with a width of at least five hundred meters.

There were a total of ten and they all occurred in an instant.

The steel-colored barrage created a great roar and something like a pale mist covered Hong Kong Island and the edge of the Kowloon Peninsula.

…So that's what Busting looks like when you can't see Lives.

But those attacks did not bring absolute destruction. They simply disturbed the Lives.

If they were not Tuned soon, they would return to normal.

"Honestly, you're rushing me too much!"

As soon as she shouted down at him, she heard a roar from the Earth Serpent.

"!?"

Her eyes widened as the Earth Serpent looked down at her with the heavens behind it.

Its giant face was growing even larger.

…It's charging toward me!?

"You're kidding!!"

Once she saw its fangs, she remembered when the red dragon had chased her.

She remembered the damage and injury to her wings, the brief meeting with the boy, and the people's screams covering the city.

In an instantaneous chain reaction, it all resurrected in her memories.

…I can't let that happen again!

She raised Wild Königin and sharpened her mind.

She linked all of her body's senses directly to her heart.

The floating feeling of falling, the sound of the splitting air, and the sensation of Wild Königin in her hands all flashed through her mind and overcame her fear of the Earth Serpent.

She Tuned the Live of fear and opened her eyes.

"!"

A sudden change reached her.

…The Lives!?

She could now see and hear the Lives of the wind.

She reflexively spread her wings wide and flapped them.

Her wings and feathers groaned under the strain of her rapid fall, but that only lasted an instant.

Instead of falling, she flew forward as if she had been kicked.

She took a course out from under the descending Earth Serpent and recalled what she needed to do.

Gunmal had told her what that was.

…How did I want to Tune long ago?

She had not wanted to use the Wind Up that she had used ever since her mother had taught it to her.

She soon found the answer.

She had told Gunmal about it in the graveyard before the dragons had flown.

“This is how I used to want to Tune, isn’t it?”

She breathed in.

“…”

After a moment of silence, she opened her mouth and produced a song.

“彼街通天地

“墜朝地仰雲

“昇夜空謳月

“惟望再笑君”

It was the Flight Song.

She placed her Live on that song and sang.

It was not a forced method like the Over Up and it was not a summoning like the Wind Up. She simply sang the Flight Song so the surrounding Lives could hear.

Then, she swung Wild Königin.

She sent out the Messages for three Earth Burns.

She had closed her eyes, so she did not know if Wild Königin's blade had sent out her Live.

She did not know what had happened, but her feet landed on the concrete ground of the wharf.

She opened her eyes and flapped her wings.

Her forward-moving force had negated the downward force of her fall.

She ran, she raced, and she accelerated.

She extended her wings at a sharp angle to catch the wind.

She saw some blue Lives.

They were the Lives of the wind.

She adjusted the angle of her wings to catch the front of that current.

Wings produced more lift the more powerfully they resisted the wind.

She kicked off the ground and floated up.

Her final two footsteps sounded much louder.

Finally, she flew up into the night sky.

Interlude 5

Akira looked around after flying into the night sky.

The Lives that Gunmal had disturbed had already vanished.

"…"

Wild Königin was not emitting any kind of Live in her hand.

…Did it not work?

As she muttered those words in her heart, she heard the dragon's roar from behind.

It was approaching from where she had been thrown out into the sky.

It was chasing after her.

"Uh, oh."

As if to confirm her worries, the dragon roared again.

It was even closer now.

She needed to run away.

To check how far away it was, she flapped her wings and looked over her shoulder, but she saw something strange there.

It was a dragon, but it was not the Earth Serpent.

It was a green Earth Burn that was much skinnier and smaller than the Earth Serpent.

The wood element Earth Serpent was following her.

"…Eh?"

She was so confused she forgot to flap her wings and she fell below the wood element Earth Burn.

Her eyes were fixed on the Earth Burn behind her, so she ended up looking overhead by the time the green dragon flew by there.

That brought another dragon into view.

A blue dragon was flying through the heavens.

“You’re kidding!?”

But that was not all.

As she fell, something appeared below her and supported her.

“It can’t be…”

She hesitantly looked down and found a great expanse of brown stone pavement.

Needless to say, it was not actually stone pavement.

She was seeing a dragon’s scales.

She was on the earth element Earth Burn’s back.

She gasped and turned in a different direction.

She looked to the Wan Chai district of eastern Hong Kong Island.

A pure-white Earth Serpent waited there.

It raised its head and stared down at the three dragons that were not even a tenth its size.

The battle had reached a new stage.

Afternoon Section - Final Act: Akira (4:57)

Part 1

Fifteen seconds after the battle began, Akira noticed her disadvantage.

The three Earth Burns were making constant hit and away attacks and she was creating spears from the wind Lives, but…

“It’s not affecting that Earth Serpent at all!”

She swung Wild Königin while yelling.

A great wind bird was instantly born. She had used an Octave greater than three million and the giant bird of prey had a wingspan of forty meters.

The bird gave a high-pitched screech and flew at the Earth Serpent.

The three Earth Burns moved out ahead of the bird as they too flew toward the dragon over ten times their size.

The dragons of blue, green, and brown tore at the Earth Serpent with their claws and fangs.

The bird of prey performed a tackle.

The beak, wings, and talons made of wind were enough for the Earth Serpent to move back a little.

But that was all.

The Earth Burns and her Tuning were showing little noticeable effect. She continued attacking, but the Earth Serpent was devouring Hong Kong all the while.

“I need to destroy that giant body,” she muttered.

At the same time, the Earth Serpent raised its head in the Wan Chai district and looked up into the heavens.

Its yellow eyes focused on the cloud-covered sky.

A beat later, it roared.

The roar was a physical blow.

“!”

Akira’s wings shook and some smaller feathers scattered into the air.

The three Earth Burns were overpowered and retreated defensively into the sky.

That cry had been more than just a roar.

The great sea surrounding Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula exploded from the very bottom.

“…!?”

The nighttime sea had the same color as deep darkness and its Lives had the same Word Color.

The air was pushed back by the Lives bursting from the sea and became a salty wind.

The roar created a powerful gust of wind, but even then it did not end.

In every direction, the Lives of the sea drew upward-pointing arcs and gathered around the Earth Serpent. The great dragon's great roar was summoning the appropriate Lives.

The Lives making up the sea created giant angular wings for the Earth Serpent.

It intended to fly.

"Wait… That's no joke!"

Wild Königin replied to Akira's shout.

…Akira! Look down!

It was Gunmal's Live.

She did as he said and saw a small space at Central's wharf that had escaped the destruction.

She also saw a few of her friends there.

…!?

She gasped and Gunmal said more.

…We're ready for the fire element! It's only gonna last an instant, okay!?

"Eh!?"

…Don't act so surprised! Hurry on down! It's after you!

When she heard that last comment, Akira cleared her ears.

Lives filled with great pressure were attempting to leave the earth.

The Earth Serpent was going to fly and Akira understood everything.

She held Wild Königin under her arm and let the Lives around her ring.

…I'm going to create an Earth Serpent, too!

The three Earth Burns roared in response to her will.

It was a pleasant noise and she kicked off the air while listening to the trio.

She made a rapid descent to where Gunmal had called her.

She flapped her wings, split the air, and moved in a straight line.

The wharf grew below her and the individual people came into view.

Gunmal was there and he raised a hand as if in greeting when he saw her.

That was the signal.

The four tanks gathered in the center of the wharf exploded, producing pillars of fire.

"You want me to use-…!?"

She never finished her shouted question.

Without slowing her descent, she held Wild Königin down and flew right into the explosive flames.

Wild Königin's blade split the rising flames.

…This will work!

She immediately started singing and the desired change was instantly achieved.

With a single swing, Wild Königin broke down the Lives of fire, heat, light, and smoke. The surrounding space was dyed in crimson.

“She did it!”

She heard the General’s voice as she flew back up into the sky and a second explosion followed after her.

Flames burst from the four tanks from left to right and four pillars of fire rose into the night sky.

Those four flaming pillars ascended in a straight line before spiraling around each other and combining.

The resultant crimson pillar swelled out much farther than the tanks from which it was born.

A red dragon was created in the sky and Akira flew right in front of it.

She lightly tapped the fire Earth Burn’s nose with Wild Königin as if greeting it.

The dragon narrowed its eyes a little and nodded.

The previous three Earth Burns joined them.

With the Earth Burns of all four elements following her, Akira briefly looked down.

Her companions were looking up at her and the dragons from the wharf.

Akira looked back down at them.

“Oh, it’s Rin.”

She spotted someone she had not seen for a while.

The woman wore a black combat outfit and a similarly-dressed young man – Fei – stood next to her.

Akira breathed a sigh of relief before her eyes stopped on another point of the wharf.

Gunmal stood there with Wild König in his hand.

“…”

She smiled a little and redirected her gaze upwards.

The typhoon had covered the sky with storm clouds.

The sky was dark, but a light illuminated it from below.

“…?”

It was the Earth Serpent.

Its horns, face, body, and wings all glowed with a somewhat yellowish coloration.

That was the power of Yang provided by Double Lee’s blood.

“Is it the power of Yang and my brother’s Live that are driving the dragon higher?”

She nodded.

“Then I only have one option.”

The very next moment, she flew straight up.

“Let’s go, everyone.”

She flew toward heaven.

Toward a higher place.

Part 2

Akira flew without looking down.

“I need to be able to reach heaven.”

She used the strength of her wings to lift her body higher and higher.

The air grew heavier and heavier, but she accelerated to overcome that weight.

To continue flying, she needed to read the wind.

She flew higher.

Toward a higher place.

“I need draw in the moonlight for the power of Yin.”

She flew.

…*The wind is weak.*

She desperately read the Lives.

She picked up the wind even as it thinned from the great altitude and she rode that current to accelerate.

She sharpened her mind.

She closed her eyes and ears and she focused her senses on her wings and the hands holding Wild Königin.

When she did, she found she could see and hear the surrounding Lives.

Even with no wind, the wind Lives were there.

And if those were there, so were the air Lives.

Many different kinds of Lives floated in the air, even if only in small quantities: water, cloud, heat, chill, and the excitement rising from those in Hong Kong.

It all reached Akira and saw her off.

She combined acceleration and flight and felt many different Lives passing through her body.

It was the same as when she had seen Gunmal's Live.

She sped up, flew between the floating Lives, and passed through them.

It was a pleasant feeling.

…*Amazing.*

Her mind smiled a little.

Her Live was joyfully shouting that she needed to climb even higher.

…I can't fight it.

Her heart desired to move higher, higher, and faster.

That desire cut off her senses and created everything.

She could sense the four dragons holding their breath and following her.

The wind, the air, and even gravity spoke to her with their Messages rather than any physical form.

Her own Live responded and she flew ever higher as if pushed on by them.

She accelerated.

She needed to reach a great height, so she flew.

The Message sung by her Live desired what was there: the power of Yin that filled the moonlight.

Every time she flapped her wings, she could feel herself approaching her destination.

The word "joy" filled her mind.

…Why?

A question occurred to her.

…Why did I try to get rid of this?

She had no time to answer the question.

She simply ascended.

Spatially, her destination was far. Temporally, it was close.

“Here it is,” she said.

She shifted her focus from the sensations in her body and back to reality.

Her beating pulse proved her own existence.

“…”

Without speaking a word, she looked around.

The four Earth Burns surrounded her.

Below, Hong Kong Island’s broken shape and the Kowloon Peninsula looked even smaller than on a map. The sea spread out around them and she could see small lights at the ends of that ocean.

Those were the cities of other countries.

Akira breathed a sigh of relief while looking at the lights of cities she had never visited.

Her elated senses heard the voices of Lives ringing in the heavens and the earth.

They belonged to the night, the sky, the clouds, the wind, the city, the earth, and the people.

“Yes.”

She gave a satisfied nod.

“It’s so full of life.”

She then looked up to the dark clouds.

They formed a dome-like curtain that turned somewhat downward.

She could not see the heavens, but she still asked a question without looking away.

“Gunmal?”

She spoke quietly, but Wild Königin still answered.

…What is it?

She smiled at his somehow kind tone.

“I want to see the moon.”

…I see.

A few seconds after that, he continued with a bitter laugh.

…I told you what to do if you need something, didn’t I?

“Yes, but are you sure? I’m going to call your Wild Name.”

…Go for it. I wouldn’t be able to reach you otherwise.

“That’s true.”

She nodded, raised Wild Königin like a sword, and closed her eyes.

She exhaled and then inhaled deeply.

She gathered all of her senses on Wild Königin and felt Wild König reaching her.

When she realized Gunmal was doing the same thing, her smile deepened.

A moment later, they moved in unison, called each other's Wild Names, and spoke.

Part 3

"La."

Akira's Live began with that sound.

"Ah."

Gunmal's Live began with that sound.

The two Lives resonated with each other and raced through Hong Kong's heavens and earth.

"…!"

The powerful steel-colored Live fired from the surface collided with Akira's Wild Königin in the heavens and was amplified into even greater power.

Light exploded into the dark clouds.

The wave of light tore into the eye of the typhoon and blew away the peak of the dark clouds spiraling around Hong Kong.

Like a ripple, a hole opened and spread through the clouds.

The receding clouds flowed even faster than water.

The sound of the wind contained a metallic sharpness.

It was a bursting sound.

It only took three seconds for the light to destroy the clouds.

A different light appeared afterwards.

This was not a steel-colored light rising from below, the unnecessarily bright light of Yang, or an artificial light.

This pale, refreshing light took the form of the full moon positioned above Hong Kong.

Part 4

The moonlight washed over Akira's entire body.

Each feather of her angular wings spread out to increase the surface area exposed to the moonlight.

Her wings cried out in flight.

She looked down at Hong Kong far below.

She saw a glowing beast there: the Earth Serpent.

It had stopped moving as it lay on the Kowloon Peninsula and let its wings smolder a little.

She could sense its gaze on her.

It was clearly looking up at her.

…Could it be waiting?

"That would be nice, brother."

She nodded and spoke with her eyes stopped on the white beast.

“Gunmal, um, once this battle is over…”

She took a breath.

“How about we go to the beach?”

He did not respond, but she continued anyway.

“We can invite everyone, talk by the water…and go swimming. I did buy a swimsuit for this year.”

…It had better be a two-piece.

She smiled bitterly at his sudden comment.

“I had a feeling you’d say that. …But don’t worry. I think we have similar tastes.”

…Ha ha ha. Then I guess I should prepare a car. I’ll need to get my license.

“Hm? You’ll take me?”

…Yeah. If I didn’t, you’d fly there.

“True.”

She nodded and looked up to the moon.

“Wait for me. I’ll be right back.”

…Don’t push yourself too hard.

“Eh?”

…You’re on even footing now. So don’t rush this and go have some fun until you’re worn out. Okay?

She was the one not to answer his question this time.

She slowly closed her eyes and opened her mouth instead.

The voice that left her lips was her Live.

“La.”

She hummed the Live that began with that sound.

But that gentle hum gradually filled with strength and stretched out to a longer sound.

“…!”

She released a loud voice and then sang the Flight Song.

“彼街通天地

“墜朝地仰雲

“昇夜空謳月

“惟望再笑君”

She sang the song with the perfectly round moon overhead and the moonlight washing over her body.

She embraced Wild Königin with her entire body.

“…!”

Her song rang out for a long time.

Her body began to fall as if pulled down by the voice descending toward Hong Kong.

The fall began slow, but it gradually picked up speed.

As if synchronized to the gravitational acceleration, Wild Königin amplified her Live more and more.

Her body broke down into Lives. It turned to dust or a glowing mist using the same process her brother had used.

Wild Königin fell while surrounded by her song, her Lives, and the moonlight.

The single spear simply dropped while shining in the moonlight.

The four Earth Burns gathered and spiraled around it.

The four-colored streams wrapped around the moonlight in the center.

The transformation only took an instant.

A bluish-whit dragon with a single great horn appeared in the heavens.

It was an Earth Serpent with the power of Yin.

It roared to express the joy of its birth.

That loud voice was as metallic as a peacock cry as it burst out.

It was the voice of the dragon Akira had become.

The Yang Earth Serpent consuming Hong Kong's earth reacted to the cry.

It looked up toward heaven and gave a sharp roar of its own.

The dragon roars reverberated without end.

The city rumbled without end.

The two dragons flew.

The Yin Earth Serpent flew from heaven to earth.

The Yang Earth Serpent flew from earth to heaven.

They charged toward each other with nimbleness unthinkable for their size.

They were fast and they would collide in an instant.

But a certain movement appeared just before those sparks audibly scattered.

Part 5

The two dragons shifted their positions just before colliding.

"…!"

Just as it looked like they would wrap around each other as if to tie a knot, they rapidly parted.

The Yang Earth Serpent curved to the right and ascended while the Yin Earth Serpent curved to the left and descended.

Together, they formed a double helix shape.

A bluish-white spiral and a yellowish-white spiral raced through Hong Kong's night sky.

The intersection of the two dragons below the moon created a puff of light.

It was a collection of Lives.

The Yang dragon split off the Lives it had created by breaking down Hong Kong and the Yin dragon absorbed them.

It almost looked like the one was handing its excess nutrients to its starving sister.

The two great dragons raised simultaneous cries.

That signaled the end of the ceremony.

The Yang Earth Serpent moved first and it pushed the air out of the way to fly toward heaven.

The Yin Earth Serpent looked up at it for just a moment before facing down once more.

The one-horned dragon descended in a straight line.

Its gaze was centered on Hong Kong Cave.

After the sound of something slicing through the wind, the Yin Earth Serpent twisted its bluish-white body and dove inside Hong Kong Cave.

Song of Farewell

Gunmal ran up the Hong Kong Island mountain path that led to Hong Kong Cave.

When he glanced upwards, he could not see the door to heaven or the Yang Earth Serpent.

A few minutes had passed since the dragon Akira had become had dove into Hong Kong Cave with a great roar.

Hong Kong had already left England's control.

"…"

He ran.

He swung Wild König to break the rocks blocking his way and he hurried to the mountain peak.

He was out of breath, but he did arrive there.

He reached the edge of the great hole once known as Hong Kong Cave.

"…Akira."

He stood on the very edge and looked down.

There, he saw what Akira had wanted.

He saw Hong Kong Cave after it had been Tuned by the dragon she had become.

Nothing was out of place and there was not a stain to be seen. The barriers built out of fear of others were gone, but the empty city had been perfectly recreated along the sides of the great pit.

It was a pretty city.

It was so delicate that it almost looked like a paper model.

Gunmal smiled and stared down at it.

His gaze dropped down to the very bottom of the pit where he saw a light.

It was the moon.

“The moon?”

He tilted his head but then realized what it was.

It was the spring.

The water at the very bottom was reflecting the moon.

It was a perfectly round and wonderful moon.

“I can’t believe this.”

He sat down, took a breath, placed a hand on his chin, and glanced up at the heavens.

The real full moon floated there.

He sighed and spoke to no one in particular as its light washed over him.

“You really do lose out when you try to act tough, don’t you?”

His words were carried away by the wind blowing up from the sea.

Only his silhouette cast a dark mark on the ground thanks to the moonlight.

All Sections - Ending: Encore - The Flight Song (2:17)

A festival was underway in Hong Kong Cave.

It was celebrating the fifth year since Hong Kong Cave had been Tuned by Akira's Earth Serpent.

The city was bright.

There were now people in Hong Kong Cave.

Some were Glossolalians and some were Nein Engels.

No accurate census had been taken, but it was known that more than a million lived there now.

There was a height difference of three kilometers from the bottom to the surface and most of the wide levels were residential areas. There was more than enough space for people to live.

The city was full of life.

The festival played a role, but the city was also filled with the shouts and songs from shops and performers.

Currently, three people were slowly descending through the pleasant noise of the giant layered city.

One was an old man, one was a young man, and the last was a child who ran out ahead of them.

The boy in a nice child's suit had four wings.

He unsteadily ran down the stairs and turned back toward the two adults walking more slowly behind him.

“Hey, Uncle Gunmal! Can I go on ahead!?”

“Yes, but…hey, G2! Don’t get lost.”

The young man replied to the boy with the Urban Name of G2.

Gunmal wore a coat of contrasting black and white and he carried Wild König on his back.

There was no harshness in his expression and the passage of five years could clearly be seen on his face.

Similarly, the General still wore his usual work uniform, but he was surrounded by a somehow calm aura.

The old man rubbed the scar on his cheek and glanced up at the young man.

“Heh heh heh. You go by uncle now, do you?”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who could be his great-grandfather.”

“…Where’s his mother?”

“In London.”

“Rin is too, isn’t she? That’s probably for the best. Kouga handled things pretty well.”

“…”

“Rumor has it the god there is personally performin’ Double Lee’s resurrection ceremony to question him. If so, maybe he’ll eventually come here for Akira’s-…”

Gunmal cut off the General.

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“It’s been five years. Hong Kong Cave is back to normal…so why hasn’t she come back?”

“We can only wait.”

“Then why are you here? Weren’t you goin’ to wait it out?”

“My nephew said he wanted to come here.”

“Liar. Quit tryin’ to act tough.”

“But it makes me look cool.”

The General sighed.

“I understand …You’re here to give up, ain’t you?”

“…”

“After five years, Hong Kong’s been revived inside this hole and we’re all more or less back to normal. But Akira alone is missin’.”

“But we made a promise.”

“For what?”

“We were gonna go to the beach once she came back.”

“Then why are you givin’ up?”

Gunmal smiled bitterly.

“I’m not giving up.”

“Really? Then why’d you choose to take over the Maldrick family?”

“Because that lets me make the rules.”

“?”

“Next year, I’m building a workshop here. Just like my brother did.”

“…”

The General fell silent as they arrived at the lowest level.

The stone-paved plaza had shops set up here and there and the sunlight poured down from directly above.

A large spring sat at the center and Gunmal’s nephew, G2, was scooping up and playing with the water.

The General narrowed his eyes when he saw the boy.

“That boy really does look a little like J-Gun.”

“Really? When he was born, I thought he looked just like a monkey.”

“Don’t say that when the boy can hear you.”

“Don’t worry. According to my mom, my brother and I were the same.”

“So you’re a family of damn monkeys?”

“Please, enough compliments.”

While exchanging verbal jabs, Gunmal and the General walked forward.

Gunmal stopped next to the spring-side stone monument engraved with the Flight Song.

He sat down and G2 stood next to him.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey! Uncle! This is where that Nein Engel you love is sleeping, isn’t it!?”

“She’s not the Nein Engel I love. She’s she Nein Engel who loved me.”

“Quit lyin’ to the kid.”

The boy did not hear the General’s warning and he asked Gunmal a question from pure curiosity.

“Hey! Uncle! Can I Tune and Bust too?”

“I don’t think your mom would like that idea.”

“What does that matter, Gunmal?” The General smiled bitterly. “Hey, boy. Do you want to be a Tuner or a Buster?”

“A Buster!”

The two adults exchanged a puzzled glance at the energetic answer.

Once they turned back his way, the boy said more.

“I want to be able to help people like you and dad did! So can I become a Buster too?”

“Precocious little brat,” muttered Gunmal as he stood up and rubbed the boy’s head with his false right hand. “A dirty brat like you’ll definitely end up like me.”

He was smiling as he said it.

The boy narrowed his eyes and those eyes fell on the stone monument next to his uncle.

“Hey, I’ve been wondering.”

“Hm?”

“What does this rock say?”

“Eh? …Oh, right. You can’t read Chinese.”

“Yeah, so what’s it say?”

“It’s a song,” replied Gunmal. “A long, long time ago, those who came before us wrote it to make sure Hong Kong would end up the way it is.”

“Those who came before us?”

“Yeah.”

“Were they famous?”

“Of course.”

“How much?”

“Just a little more than me.”

“That’s not very much.”

The General laughed bitterly at the child's blunt comment.

Hearing the laugh, Gunmal touched the stone monument.

At the same time, an entertainer in the plaza started playing a song on a sanxian.

"The Flight Song, huh?"

Gunmal suddenly opened his mouth as he listened to the accompaniment.

彼街通天地 (That city connects heaven and earth)

墜朝地仰雲 (I fall in the morning and look up to the clouds from the earth)

昇夜空謳月 (I rise at night and sing with the moon in the sky)

惟望再笑君 (All I desire is to smile with you again)

His voice carried on the sanxian's music and his Live sounded loudly on top of it all.

The reverberation expanded upwards from the bottom of the pit.

Gunmal's Flight Song carried a hint of his Live as it slowly but surely filled the air of Hong Kong Cave.

It rang out.

The song came to an end.

Silence followed.

G2 then tugged on the bottom of his coat.

“?”

The boy answered Gunmal’s confusion by pointing upwards.

“Encore.”

Gunmal cleared his ears and heard applause coming from somewhere in Hong Kong Cave.

His song had been mistaken for an entertainer’s and people were applauding in hopes of an encore.

It gradually grew louder.

As more applause piled on, it gained a certain beat.

It settled at a certain tempo and the synchronized clapping built to a great thickness.

It sounded like one giant set of hands clapping.

Unable to bear with that beat any longer, accompaniment for the Flight Song began playing from a higher level. The previous sanxian similarly played on the lowest level.

“…!?”

Drawn out by that ensemble, a male voice sang the Flight Song somewhere in the city.

It only grew from there.

Singing voices and accompaniment rang from every corner of Hong Kong Cave.

Countless voices burst from every level.

“Oh,” muttered the General.

Everyone’s voices had joined as one for the chorus.

The music played loud.

The ensemble and beat of clapping hands enveloped Gunmal, the General, and G2.

“…”

They heard the voices.

Man, woman, boy, and girl all sang or played the Flight Song.

Hong Kong Cave was singing.

Their singing voices were drawn out by Gunmal’s Live in his voice.

And Gunmal stared straight up.

“…?”

But he suddenly pulled Wild König from his back.

“What is it?”

The young man held the large Device out in front of his and the old man’s eyes.

The base of the Device’s hilt contained the Uroboros Rondo Wild Emblem.

Gunmal had created that Device and it was now trembling ever so slightly.

“It’s resonating.”

Wild König would only resonate with Wild Königin which had been created at the same time.

He looked to the spring.

They were faint, but he saw ripples on the water’s surface.

The small ripples were spreading along the large spring, but they did not vanish. More and more were created as if to make their presence known.

Similarly, the tremor inside Wild König gradually grew larger and faster.

Gunmal gulped.

“It really is. Wild König is resonating.”

A smile appeared on his lips.

“Can you believe this!? Wild Königin is singing! Who is it!? Who’s singing!? It’s coming up from the bottom of the spring!”

He knew perfectly well who it was and G2 shouted up at him.

“Sing, uncle!”

That small wish was granted.

Gunmal held Wild König close and he opened his mouth.

He began with a prelude that could have been an “ah” or a “la” and he began to sing.

As countless singing voices rang through Hong Kong Cave, he sang the Flight Song as if his voice was the most correct and as if he wanted someone to hear it.

The hands clapping to the beat cheered him on.

"…!"

Gunmal sang.

Hong Kong sang with him.

The ripples in the spring grew larger.

And a song rang out in response to that movement.

"La!"

Gunmal's voice rang out powerfully and loudly while sounding just like Akira's Live.

The song danced and reverberated through the city that connected heaven to earth.

To wake a certain girl.

And to be able to laugh in the end.

Loudly.

Loudly!

Hey, can you hear it!?

This is my answer!

Afterword

I'll just start with the phone call this time.

"Oh, is this Kawakami? What is it? We already had our chat for Hong Kong's second part, didn't we?"

"It was censored. …And maybe this one will be too if I mention that? Oh, well."

"Hmmm, okay. So let's have a serious chat this time."

"Um, I think I…played around a lot with this novel. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I did."

"You said you thought of this one like a song, didn't you?"

"To see that, you probably need to read it a second time. I think you'll get a different impression than the first time."

"What about the color pages stuff you mentioned before?"

"Yes, after reading both books, make sure to reread the image story in their color pages. It should answer most of your questions…maybe."

"Just so you know, this guy (He means me –Kawakami), played with the actual text based on the titles of the acts. Part A Act 4 plays shiritori with some of the dialogue and Part B Act 2 has a seven character line every seven lines.[1] He said it's because he wrote it like he was writing a song, but who would ever notice that?"

"I didn't do anything like that in Part A's Opening, Act 9, or Final Act or in Part B's Act 7 or later, so don't worry. Some of the tricks are

pretty short and nonsensical, so it would probably be bad for your health to try to find them all."

"With that kind of code in there, this has got to be one of the weirder books out there."

"But isn't that what we all wanted?"

What did all of you think?

Anyway, this lazy afterword is pretty long this time too.

If you read through both books, you should understand that Hong Kong is a city of music and time. Or I hope you do, anyway.

I really wrote a lot for this one. I meddled a lot in Akira and Gunmal's designs, so they really turned out to be something amazing in both the text and illustrations. (I'm really thankful to my editor Mr. S and my illustrator Yasu-san for accepting my designs.) Am I the only one who wants to make an encyclopedia for all this someday?

Anyway, this is goodbye for Hong Kong. The story of Akira, Gunmal, and Akira's parents is complete and I have no intention of adding anything more. If you want to know what happened in Hong Kong's past, make sure to think on what the living characters said and did. My hints are to focus on the General and to check out the differences between the two stories in the color pages of the two books.

We'll be leaving Hong Kong with a somewhat dry relationship, but I think that makes it a good starting point for the City Series. After all, Hong Kong's illustrator, Yasu-san, is also designing the main characters and illustrating the next entry, Osaka (both the novel and

game). This should help solidify the previously unclear structure of the City Series.

This series includes the fantastical ideas of Lives, ether, and emblems; the half century or more that has passed since London and Berlin; the history that has occurred in the meantime; and the names of different cities and people. With all that, it should feel like something of a crossover. Which cities' histories will be closely intertwined from now on? (Well, I have enough material for about ten more stories.)

Now, then. I read back through Part B while listening to the new version of PSYS's From The Planet With Love. (It would be the ending theme.)

"What was the difference between Double Lee and Akira."

I also belatedly thought about that.

Now then, now then. The next city is finally in Japan! It's Osaka! (For information on Osaka, check out the website mentioned in Part A. You'll find everything there.)

Early November 1997. The morning after coming down with a cold.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. Jump up↑ Only in the original text, not the translation.